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A

# NORTH COUNTRY COMEDY

BY

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"DISARMED," ETC.



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# A NORTH COUNTRY COMEDY.

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## CHAPTER I.

### FIRST IN THE FIELD.

**A** SWEET hour, and a sweet place! Yet to the two timid travellers who had just alighted at the little station the situation seemed full of peril. All was silent but for the quiet murmur of that northern sea. The long summer day had closed, and the far-off Cumberland hills, on which they had lately gazed for the first time, were now wrapped in shadow. No train left the place till morning. No sign of a village or human habitation could be descried through the gloaming. There they waited, and there it seemed as if they might wait for ever! No one took the slightest notice of them. The booking-office and waiting-rooms were already locked up, the lamps put out, one official had taken his departure, and the rest seemed about to follow his example.

“O Prue, Prue!” began the elder and more timid of the pair. “Something to our advantage, indeed! The place seems a wilderness, and the inhabitants to have hearts of stone, thus abandoning two helpless women at such an hour! What would my Edwin have said, had he but lived to see!”

That allusion to the lost love of her youth indicated the only bit of egotism about the sweet little spinster of well-nigh sixty years. Her Edwin had been dead and buried for thirty and odd; yet to Sabina Ricketts the memory of the young lawyer's clerk, the lover of her girlhood, was fresh and sweet as to-day's rose. She seldom alluded to him, except in such a moment as this; the recollection was too sacred to be evoked upon ordinary occasions; and, moreover, she felt shy of intruding her personality upon others.

Prudence Perfect, her companion, was younger by fifteen years, and far sprightlier, both in manner and appearance. She was now looking about her with much alacrity and excitement. No memory of a lost Edwin, no buried love, rendered her insensible to the romance of the hour or the possibility of romance in the future.

In spite of some natural trepidation she was relishing this position. It was the first adventure of her life, and it might be the beginning of many more.

For the first time, too, she was breathing the air of a foreign land—absolutely foreign to her seemed this north country, Kamschatka or Timbaktu could hardly have impressed her imagination more. The whiff of sea-air, the purple outline of sea, the hanging woods shutting in the valley—all these were new and bewildering as the scenes that greeted the eyes of Christiana and Mercy on their way to the Celestial country.

“Those beautiful mountains, if we could only climb them this very moment!” she cried with girlish rapture; then, catching sight of a porter, she ran after him, and appealed breathlessly for help. “How far is it to Briardale? Is there no kind of conveyance?” she cried.

"None whatsomdever, miss—not if you waited till Martinmas," replied the man. "Folks always tramp it on foot, and 'tis only a good two mile or so."

"But the night is very dark, and the place seems quite deserted. Could you not accompany us?" asked Prue, Sabina sighing and trembling at her elbow.

"Not now, miss—not if you paid me a guinea a minute. I'm on night-duty at t'other station," said the man, adding, by way of encouragement, "Lawk a mussy, who's to harm you? You have only to go as straight as the crow flies, and, leastways, you'll get to the town before morning."

The idea of such a walk in utter darkness, amid these solitudes, grew more and more portentous.

"Lawk, miss!" pursued the man, "you are sure to meet the postman on the way, and mayhap a drunken drover or two a-comin' from market, and a few tramps or gipsies. The road is not lonely a bit," he added, growing more and more cheerful as he piled up horrors. "If you don't look sharp, by the time you get to the inn it will be shut up, so make haste; and, once shut up, it don't open—not for nobody."

"Trust in God, and let us set out boldly," said Sabina, in a low, desperate voice. "It must be done; and when a thing must be done, I think of my Edwin lying in his cold grave, and that braces me up for the worst."

Prue also summoned courage. After all, were they not about to obtain something to their advantage? Great fortune is not won without painful hazards. Yes, come what might, they would set out bravely.

To less faint-hearted pedestrians the walk offered nothing short of enchantment. Not that much of the

surrounding country could be descried. It was twilight rather than night itself. Only a star or two glimmered faintly, dark purple the distant hills, darker still the wooded sides of the valley, narrower and narrower grew the band of amber light in the West; yet, as the practised musician discerns subtler melody in the quiet fugue than in the brilliant concerto, so here the true lover of beauty would find infinite gradations of light and shadow, dim harmonies of form, and hues even more beautiful than the glowing effects of day. Over the place, too, brooded an air of perfect peace. It seemed as if the very genius of tranquillity reigned there.

This veiled, indefinite loveliness and sweet, caressing repose imparted to the two frightened travellers a momentary rapture. In a little while they forgot their apprehensions.

"If we arrive safely, what a sight will greet our eyes in the morning!" cried Sabina, as they now stepped along valiantly. "I have always contented myself with imagining mountains and wild places; but, of course, we can never quite imagine anything, so my Edwin always said. Ah! were he but here to enjoy this adventure with us!"

Just then Prue gave her companion a violent lunge, and both walked on panting with fear. It was nothing but a rustling in the hedge that had disturbed them—some rabbit scuttling to its burrow, or perhaps a harmless toad hastening to its runlet; but, to the minds of the pair, the noise presaged some fearful encounter.

They walked on for a quarter of an hour in silent trepidation; then, hearing nothing more, felt partly reassured.

"We ought not to feel in the least alarmed," Prue said in a tone of self-reproach. "Were we Christians, as we call ourselves, had we a particle of true faith, we should walk on unconcernedly if fiery-mouthed dragons beset our path, confident of Divine protection. Oh!——"

The ejaculation of alarm was followed by a terrified whisper.

"I hear footsteps! I am sure it is a man! Hold tight; but do not seem afraid!"

The steps came nearer and nearer. True enough, it was a man; the loud, quick tramp indicated that. What would happen to them? Each carried a watch, of no great value certainly except to themselves; and each a few pounds, although so elaborately secreted about their persons that not a pickpocket in the kingdom had surely wit enough to find them out. If not robbed or murdered, might not far worse misfortunes happen to them? There they were, two defenceless beings, at the mercy of some ruffian of the other sex, evidently on the prowl with malicious intent.

A terrible moment of suspense, and all was over.

"Good-night, my dears!" cried the man cheerily. It was the village postman; and he mistook the two figures for those of his neighbours, the tall schoolmistress and her diminutive mother.

The pair, murmuring secret little thanksgivings, hastened on.

"He seemed a kind man," Sabina said, in a tone of great relief. "Oh, dear, I wish he would not walk so fast! He will be out of hearing in no time, and unable to come to the rescue if any ruffian should attack us. But, Prue, just think for a moment what happy beings



men must be, never to feel afraid in dark country roads! I well remember a saying of my Edwin's, as he set off unconcernedly one foggy night to cross Clapham Common. And he said—I remember his exact words—'Bina,' he said (he always called me Bina, and nobody else ever did; I would not permit it), 'Bina, a well-regulated mind——' ”

But the narrative came to an aghast pause. Prue caught Sabina's arm, and they listened for a moment tremblingly. From the distance reached them dreadful noises, stertorous guffaws, roystering snatches of song, loud riotous talk. There could be no mistake. It was evidently a party of half-drunken drovers—worse still, tramps—returning from the fair.

Not giving themselves time for reflection, the two companions in peril now made wildly for the hedge. They must get beneath its shadow, and, holding their breath, endeavour to escape observation. Between the wayside and the hedge lay a deep ditch, with sloping banks, which a showery summer had kept full of water. The first plunge forward placed the luckless pair ankle-deep in mud; the second found them up to their knees in water; the third, to their distorted imagination, threatened nothing short of a watery grave. For the ditch being particularly deep at this spot, the rain had formed a kind of reservoir; the more wildly they plunged, the deeper they became immersed; and now it did indeed appear as if that much-dreamed-of something to their advantage would end in dire calamity. Death by drowning was surely imminent! Fear of one kind banished terror of another. The obstreperous drovers, of whom just before they had stood in dread, were now hailed as deliverers.

They cried aloud for help, and their piteous appeal could be heard from far and wide. The talk and laughter ceased; and to the rescue, as fast as their legs could carry them, came the roysterers—true enough a pair of drovers, and somewhat jovial after a hearty bout, but honest husbands and fathers both, and not in the least disposed to harm a mouse, much less to lay nefarious hands on a woman.

Fortunately they were provided with a lantern, and by its friendly aid at once realised the situation.

“Lawks-a-daisy, mother!” cried the first, as he brought the trembling Sabina to land. “As blind as moles ye must be, surely, to miss the road! Maybe—no harm intended—you’ve been to a funeral and come home a bit groggy, like your betters. Leastways, here you are, safe and sound, on terry-firmy, but as dripping as an ’opping toad. Have you got out t’other female, Jem?”

“All right, Joe,” retorted his companion, a worthy fellow but a bit of a wag. “And a light ’un in hand she is. I’d carry her to Lancaster with pleasure, I would. So here you are, miss. You’ll have to step more than a mile to walk yourself dry again. That’s all the comfort I can give ye.”

“Thank you both, dear men!” said Sabina, fumbling in her pocket. “We are strangers here, and very timid—so timid that when we heard you coming we tried to hide in the hedge; for we could not in the least tell who it was. It might have been thieves or murderers.”

“‘Might have been’ is a peck-measure without a bottom,” quoth the waggish deliverer. “I might have been Pontius Pilate or Lord Nelson, but am Jim Hep-

burn instead. The job isn't worth paying for. Howsomdever, as you're so pressing, I'll take sixpence rather than disoblige a lady."

"Dear men, we thank you so much, so very much!" Sabina said, as she slipped sixpence into the hand of each, the thriftier Prue nudging her reproachfully. Then the men wished them "Good-night," and went on, laughing over the adventure.

"I think one sixpence between them would have sufficed," Prue said, when both had recovered self-possession and were once more on the march.

"O Prue! to count the cost of manly deeds! Had not the rest of my money been sewed up in my stays, I should have given double, I am sure I should!"

"I do hope our next adventure will be more pleasant," Prue said, always hopeful, yet with ardour somewhat damped. "It seems ages already since we left home; and what a comfort to sleep in a bed once more!"

"If we ever do!" Sabina said. Their nocturnal wanderings seemed to have lasted for weeks; and, on principle, she always prepared for the worst. "You see, we can't be half-way yet, and so many more mischances may happen before we arrive; then if that inn should be shut up—the inn that never opens, you know!"

"Do let us be brisk!" cried Prue; so they stepped forward with greater determination and alacrity than ever.

It was now twilight no longer, but night—silvery, starry, delicious. Sweet smells of wild rose reached them from the hedgerows; the floor of heaven was studded with dazzling lights; whilst the glow-worms,

lesser stars of earth, illumined the dusky way; and deeper, intenser, the Sabbath-like calm brooding over the quiet land.

The mood of the travellers varied from ecstatic enjoyment and looking forward to terrible suspense and gloomy foreboding. No sooner were they well out of one predicament than they became frolicsome as kittens, although perhaps on the verge of another far more terrible.

"Think of waking up in a hotel! I have never eaten a meal in an inn in my life," Sabina said, with the naïve anticipation of a child. "I believe that men are so superior to women in many ways because they go to inns."

"And if we really find that there is something to our advantage!" laughed Prue. "How new to us to feel rich! Those two sixpences you gave away just now! How nice to be able to give away, not only sixpences but half-crowns, without feeling low-spirited about it—not exactly low-spirited, perhaps, but a little taken aback at having permitted ourselves such an imprudence."

Sabina caught her companion's gaysome mood.

"We have already got something to our advantage, I am sure—this seeing the world, I mean. It is not pleasant to tumble into a ditch full of water, certainly; but even that experience has given us new insight into human character. Then to reflect that we are hundreds of miles from home, and among people who have never so much as heard of our very existence! The thought of it makes my heart leap. Don't let us dwell too much on the money, or whatever else may be coming to us, but let us enjoy the present moment to the utmost."

Thus they chatted on for a quiet half-hour, nothing more occurring to mar their composure; and soon—yes, there could be no mistake about it—they were approaching the village. One or two houses of the better sort were passed, their white walls gleaming amid dark shrubberies; then a cottage or two; finally, a brisk walk of a few minutes brought them to the village street—if street it could be called—a single line of straggling houses and cottages. Only a feeble light glimmered here and there in some upper storey. Not a soul seemed astir. Profound silence reigned throughout the place.

They now came to the inn, the big house described to them. Here, too, all was obscure, silent, deserted. They pulled the bell, they plied the knocker; no friendly step sounded in the corridor, no welcome light moved overhead. Their worst fears then were realised—they were shut out for the night.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE REVEREND MR. BACCHUS.

**T**HE sense of being among human habitations saved them from despair. Prue, always alert to take an initiative, and imbued with the conviction that invisible protectors, heaven-sent ministrants, followed them each step by the way, put on a cheerful countenance. She would knock up every soul in the village, she said, rather than spend the night afield.

Sabina, also inexpressibly cheered by the sight of bricks and mortar, gate-posts, and cabbage-gardens, acquiesced, with inspiriting allusions to the lost Edwin. Arm-in-arm they walked on defiantly, and were soon rewarded for their intrepidity. A few hundred yards and they were close under a cheerfully-lighted dormer, which overhung a little paled-in flower-garden. Their loud, imploring knocks brought nobody to the door, but the window was thrown up, and a man's head peered out.

"Please," began Prue, in those well-trained accents that immediately, and even to ears not oversensitive, indicated one gently born and bred. "Oh, please can you tell us what to do? We are strangers, and have just walked from the station. There was no conveyance, and the inn is shut up and won't open. We can't make it."

"Wait a bit; I will dress myself and come down," replied a voice from above, the voice of a man good to women who scream and babies.

The window was closed, and the two, chuckling with relief, watched the tall, lank shadow of their deliverer

as he moved backwards and forwards. He was evidently making a hasty toilet.

In a very few minutes the light vanished, and the Curate appeared, for it was clerical patronage they had found; he had donned his pantaloons, thrust his stockingless feet into slippers, thrown on a shabby woollen dressing-gown, and there he was. Not exactly the kind of man to flee to in an extraordinary dilemma looked the Curate of Briardale. He wore an air of pathetic absence of mind and dreamy helplessness, much as if he had not the remotest conception of what would happen to him the very next moment. But he was a man, he was a clergyman, he was kind. To Sabina Ricketts and Prudence Perfect he appeared little short of an angel. For very relief and pleasure the pair sat in the parlour to which he had conducted them, smiling speechlessly at him and at each other.

“So the inn is shut up?” he began, smiling. “There is nothing remarkable in that fact, I assure you. We are early folks in these parts, and nobody ever takes us by surprise at this hour of the night.”

Then he glanced at the intruders, evidently wondering what their business at Briardale could be.

“We have business in the neighbourhood, and intend taking rooms here for a week or two,” Prue said, explanatorily. “But what we are to do for the moment we are at a loss to conceive.”

She looked helpless, but in nowise dispirited, as she spoke; all terrors had now vanished from the situation. Had Prue found herself, with half a dozen companions in misfortune, suddenly cast adrift from sunken ship in mid-ocean, hardly a rag to cover them, only a handful of haricot-beans and a pint or two of fresh water

among all, the presence of a clergyman would have more than sustained her courage. It might have made a Grace Darling, a Jeanne d'Arc of her. Her faith in the cassock was really beautiful.

"I will tell you what you can do," replied the clergyman, with great good-nature. "It so happens that my spare room was got ready this very day for a college friend, who had promised to sleep here on his way to Carlisle. Pray accept a bed under my roof for the night. You need have no fear as to the dryness of the sheets. I aired them myself. You see," he added, smiling ruefully, "since my poor wife's death, I am obliged to attend to these things."

"You are too, too kind!" cried Sabina and Prue, in a breath.

"I dare say you would both do as much for me," was the reply. "But let me explain who I am. I am the Curate here; my name is Bacchus—an odd name for a clergyman, anyhow, is it not? and especially for me. Little enough of the Bacchanalian about me, I am sure! But we can't help what names we come into the world with; I wish we could. Well, it is settled, then: you sleep here. And now do pray have some supper—bread and cheese and a glass of ale. I am sorry I have nothing better to offer you."

He brought forth the promised cheer, and the travellers moved to the table flushed with pleasure. They were, indeed, half famished. The bread was passing stale, the cheese a trifle hard, the beer somewhat flat; but the pair had never degusted a meal with more relish. The sense, too, of being housed for the night raised their spirits. They supped with all possible despatch, reining in their gaiety and loquaciousness.



They had roused the poor Curate from his bed, and were themselves sitting in damp clothes. The sooner the delightful repast ended the better.

"I think you will find everything you want in your room; I arranged it myself," said their host, as he conducted them to an upper chamber. "My youngest boy is restless with his teething; but, although he disturbs me a good deal, you will not hear him here."

"And we disturbed your sleep!" cried Prue, in a tone of keen self-reproach.

"No, indeed; I was wide awake," replied the Rev. Mr. Bacchus. "But these broken nights make me feel terribly sleepy in the daytime. I wish the tables could be turned sometimes, and preachers allowed to nap in the pulpit instead of their congregations napping in the pews. What difference could it make?"

Then he bade them good-night, the friends saying nothing, because they had no adequate words at command. They were too thankful, too full of emotion, for speech.

And next morning, when refreshed by sleep they awoke in this new, sweet world, what feelings were theirs! How rapturously they drew up the blinds, and gazed on a landscape now seen for the first time!

Tented travellers watching an Eastern sun gild the columns of Baalbec, classic enthusiasts catching a first adorable glimpse of Athens from the harbour, could not have felt a more grateful sense of novelty and fascination.

Nothing here at all resembled the familiar scenes from which they had come. That wide, sunny bay, now a beauteous sheet of silvery water, later on a velvety waste of fine brown sand; those far-off mountains of pale gold and delicate purple; the rich hanging

woods framing in the picture—how wonderful, how fair, to their untravelled eyes!

The impressions and experiences of the night before, the alternating fears and rejoicings, the final welcome—all now filled their minds with delight. And then the Curate's appearance! They had never beheld a gentleman without his stockings before. The whole thing was so romantic!

They were almost ready to go downstairs, when they heard the thumping of a child's fists on the door, and in came an odd, confidential, precocious bantling of six.

"Papa heard you moving about, so sent me to say breakfast is just ready," he said. "Papa washed me, and I put on my clothes my own self;" and, prattling on in the same strain, he led them downstairs.

"Which of you ladies will pour out the coffee?" asked the Curate cheerfully, emerging from the kitchen coffee-pot in hand.

Sabina glanced at Prue. Prue was the younger, the more ornamental of the two; Prue was not yet past sentiment and coquetry; clearly she ought to have the gratification of presiding at the Curate's table. So, with a charming blush and shy smile—upon such occasions Prue felt as youthful as a girl of seventeen—she accepted the invitation.

"Oh, dear!" cried their host, when the business of breakfast was fairly begun, "I have clean forgotten prayers! Well, we must have an extra portion tomorrow. Georgie, Jane can't leave the baby, so run and fetch the mustard."

The Rev. Mr. Bacchus looked all the better for being fully dressed. The black clerical garments set off his fair hair and complexion to the best advantage. His

appearance wanted tone, emphasis, relief; and these blacks and whites gave it. In a light dun-coloured suit, it would have been almost a puzzle to say which was the clothing and which the man. Now there could be no mistake about it.

In honour of his visitors, too, he had made his toilet more elaborately than usual—trimmed his beard, put on new clothes. In fact, thus done justice to, the Rev. Mr. Bacchus looked no meanly-endowed son of Adam. There seemed no point, no purpose, about him; that was the drawback.

Sabina and Prue were astonished at their own ease and gaiety; but, as Prue confessed afterwards, pleasant as it was to be thus hospitably entertained, another feeling predominated—there would be no dreadful hotel-bill in the morning. Had that inhospitable, un-compliant inn opened its doors, who knows what the expense might have been! They made, however, immediate inquiries as to lodgings.

“I will go with you, and see what there is to be had in the village, after breakfast. But pray do not be in such a hurry about it. Georgie will show you the garden whilst I see to my washing. It is the washerwoman’s day, and I must get the clothes ready the first thing.”

“And the funeral, papa?” put in Georgie.

“Oh, dear me!” said the Curate, “I had clean forgotten that there was a funeral. Georgie always has to remind me of these things. And, dear me! there is a christening too! How inconveniently funerals and christenings always happen! Well, really, there is no help for it. You ladies must positively share my beans and bacon at 1 o’clock, and then I promise you faithfully to see about lodgings.”

The pair made feeble remonstrance, but their hospitable entertainer would have his way. It was settled, then, they stayed to dinner, and forthwith he bustled off to see to his washing.

No sooner was he out of the house than Sabina and Prue set to work to make themselves useful. A huge stack of unmended clothes, just home from the wash, lay on the parlour-table. They brought out their huswives, and plied needle and thread with right goodwill.

"I wonder how we shall both feel this day week," began Sabina—"whether we shall have come into a fortune, or be going home fools for our pains?"

"There must be something for us, when you think of it," answered Prue. "You see, we are the very persons wanted; and people are not ferreted out from remote quarters of the globe for nothing."

"After all," said Sabina, "we may inherit a million, or lose the little we have got. It is not worth thinking about. The world we move in is a mere cocoanut, tumbling about in space; and we mortals are of no more account than ants."

"It *seems* to matter," put in Prue.

"But it really doesn't, you know," Sabina went on. "On such occasions as these, I think of Sir Isaac Newton and the apple, or of Christopher Columbus and the egg; and then I say it's all one whether we are happy or miserable."

"But," said Prue, feeling her way gingerly through the metaphysical labyrinth, "seeming is so like being that we can't help behaving as if it did matter. And," she went on with alacrity, as a new light dawned upon her mind, "although, of course, we ought not to covet

wealth for its own sake, yet, as it seems such a blessing in many ways, it is exactly the same thing as if it were. True, when we think of Sir Isaac Newton and the apple—the wonderful ways of Nature, I mean—we ought to feel perfectly indifferent to worldly fortune. But downright poverty and affliction, if not of any real consequence, appear so; we always want to relieve them when they come in our way."

Sabina sighed.

"Put it as you please. If nothing comes of this journey, I shall set it down as an interposition of Providence. Wealth would most likely have been the ruin of us."

"But without being in the least bit wealthy," Prue added, sticking to the point, "we may be put in a position to help others. Suppose, now—suppose this something to our advantage turns out to be only a thousand pounds apiece—I put it at the lowest possible figure—what a deal of good in a small way we could do!"

"I am not sure that doing good, as you call it, is not another delusion," Sabina said. "Of course, if this fortune really comes to us, we should not spend it on ourselves. How to find out who is more deserving? At least, we are not drunkards, thieves, or impostors."

"We need not run into either extreme," Prue said cheerfully. The more she talked of the dreamed-of wealth, the more surely she felt it hers. "We would not deny ourselves a few little comforts, neither would we squander our money on undeserving objects. And then, you see, there may be five, ten, twenty times as much as we have said."

"Ah!" sighed Sabina, "why was not this something to our advantage heard of thirty years ago? Why did not my Edwin live to rejoice in his Bina's good fortune?"

Prue had ever a cheery word.

"After all," she said, "you are happier than if you had never known your Edwin—than if you had never loved and been loved in return, I mean. There is no comparing the two situations."

Sabina made sentimental reply; and they chatted over their sewing till mid-day. Then the mended clothes were neatly folded and put back in the basket, and the friends strolled into the garden.

"Dear me!" said the Curate, coming to meet them. "I beg you a thousand apologies; I have to absent myself again immediately after dinner, so that you must really accept a bed for to-night also. You must, really. Then to-morrow morning I promise you faithfully to see about lodgings."

Sabina looked at Prue; Prue looked at Sabina.

"It was too, too kind," both said; and again the thought occurred to the thrifty mind of Prue, "What a saving of expense!"

"I shall be very glad if you will stay," pursued their host. "If Georgie tumbles into the pond, or baby has another fit, Jane will at least have some one to go to. And I have a considerable journey to make. I cannot be home before dusk. The fact is, a notorious burglar has just been caught red-handed, and popped into Harborough Gaol; and, in the absence of the chaplain, I am to go and try and touch his heart. How I am to touch his heart I cannot imagine; but go I must. The poor fellow, they say, is sure to be hanged."

"Of course we will stay if you wish it; we are only too happy," Prue said, thinking how pleasant it would be to get their boxes from the station, and be able to wear her best gown.

"The trap that drives me to the station can bring back your luggage," said the Curate, as if anticipating her thoughts. "You will like, I daresay, to unpack your things."

The friends thanked him and gratefully resigned themselves to the inevitable.

True, they were delaying the fateful revelation; they would not learn for another day or two the tidings so anxiously, so tremblingly, looked for. But, on the other hand, they felt almost fearful of possessing the truth. It might be but the bursting of a child's soap-bubble, after all.

"And then to feel so safe, so sheltered, here," cried Sabina, "after exposure to dangers of all kinds, and perils of the deep! Well, not perils of the deep, exactly; yet, if water is deep enough to drown you, one might just as well be in a ditch at home as in the Atlantic Ocean—it is the same thing in the end."

"And, of course, when men are quite alone in the world, they are more interesting to women," Prue replied. "It must be so. This kind Mr. Bacchus—I wonder what we can do for him in turn?"

They found that they need not wonder long. What with amusing the baby, binding up Georgie's thumb, helping Jane to gather currants, and repairing another basket of clothes, the time passed profitably and all too quickly. It was one of the happiest days they could remember, both said.

## CHAPTER III.

### EXPECTING THE CLAIMANTS.

**W**INDING between limestone crags, pastures dazzlingly bright, dotted with herds, parklike slopes, rich woods, and a little lake lying deep down in the green, the road climbs upwards from Briardale in the direction of Hopedale Fell.

The fell is seen far off, a grand silvery peak, lightly tinted here and there with green. The sparse habitations passed on the way are all built of the grey limestone of the district, and wonderfully does it harmonise with the landscape. One great charm of the scenery is the luxuriance of the hedges. Where the division is not made of neatly piled blocks of stone are hedges of the old-fashioned sort, a tangle of honeysuckle, wild rose, and clematis, with abundance of hazel-trees, fresh and pliant. Ivy clothes the limestone walls, and every bit of waste ground is bluish-green with the berries of the juniper-tree. It is as if a blue cloud had dropped. Wild flowers abound, but the amateur must go farther afield for rarities or uncommon ferns. Having climbed for three-quarters of an hour, the traveller catches a last glimpse of the sea—here a mere silvery streak above the purple fells—before dipping into the valley that leads to Hope-



dale. Then are passed neat cottages with charming flower-gardens, beautiful meadows tenanted by happy kine, and the straggling village is reached, with its fine old church and grand bit of ivy-covered masonry—the keep of the Manor. This is, however, not seen from the village; a large, winding meadow leads to the back of the farm-house built on to the ruins, and you must reach the other side in order to realise the former bulk and solidity of the structure. Only the keep, with a fragment or two of wall and Gothic window, remains. As far as practicable, modern occupiers have turned the ruin to advantage. The tower is roofed in, and used for storage of farming implements. The homestead, out-buildings, and ruin make a huge, walled-in congeries of buildings, not without a certain picturesqueness; whilst the scenery around is charming—sloping pastures of brightest velvety green; white cottages nestling amid orchards and gardens; and, beyond, the grey fells tapestried with green; and dim Westmoreland hills.

The white smoke of the far-off railway, threading such scenes on week-days, breaks the solitude of Briar-dale. Here, at Hopedale, are fewer signs of life—scattered groups of haymakers at work, a ploughman turning the soil, a farmer getting in the rich crop of purple comfrey, and cows and sheep enjoying their rich pastures to the utmost; a variety of birds swarm on heath and sea-shore, whilst young rabbits scuttle about the hill-sides, as if they too were playthings, and not the prey of human kind.

“When are they going to make their appearance, I wonder—the dear creatures in search of something to

their advantage?" said Mrs. De Robert, the owner of Hopedale Manor, to her friend, the beautiful and spirited Eugenia Ivory. "Though to be sure," she added, in those quick, satirical, cynical tones of hers, "when I have got rid of all I have to give them, and you and I are ready to sally forth, as you call it, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in search of adventure, what can possibly happen to us, or, at any rate, to an old woman like myself?"

Miss Ivory answered with perfect gravity. She was one of the few people who can say the most astounding things and tell the most wonderful stories with an unmoved countenance.

"Age has nothing whatever to do with romance. At seventy, Ninon de l'Enclos turned the head of every man who beheld her; and Madame de Maintenon bewitched the King of France when she was old enough to be a great-grandmother."

"Well, suppose we do get as far as Rome, now; if everything turns out well, and we really do start on our travels—what could possibly happen to us in Rome?"

Miss Ivory opened wide her handsome eyes.

"Dozens of extraordinary things! For instance, when we get there we shall take an apartment for the winter, as other people do, of course; and our introductions will bring us a little society. One Italian count, of suitable age, wants to marry you; another, his nephew, wants to marry me. But, when matters come to a point, the notaries have muddled the names; and, do what we will, you are married to the young man, and I to the old. Such *imbroglios* are of daily occurrence."

"Well, I don't suppose we shall ever get to Rome,"

Mrs. De Robert said, with her dry little laugh; "but we may perhaps get to Chamounix. Now, as if anything could possibly happen to us at Chamounix!"

Miss Ivory looked more incredulous than ever.

"The very land of hazard and exploit! The first thing we are sure to hear on arriving is that some unwary traveller is just lost in the glaciers. Every soul in the place sets out in the search. You join one party, I another (by way of variety, we must not always keep together); but your party is snowed up in the ch<sup>^</sup>let at the top of Mont Blanc for a week, mine starts off for Constantinople next day. When we meet again, we shall both have travelled half over Europe."

"Oh dear, how nice it would be! but it will never happen, I am sure of that. Well, we may perhaps get so far as Paris. That is certainly not too much of an undertaking in these days. Now, what on earth in the way of adventure could happen to us in Paris?"

"As if Paris were not, after all, the only place for adventure, in the proper sense of the word," continued Miss Ivory, grave as before. "What, indeed, may not happen to us or to any one else in Paris! We are sauntering, for instance, in the quieter alleys of the Bois de Boulogne. The ball of a pistol whizzes just over our bonnets——"

"Oh dear!" cried Mrs. De Robert.

"We hear a heavy thud," serenely pursued Miss Ivory, "and come suddenly upon two duellists, now embracing and the best of friends. The wounded man begs us to shield his antagonist of the minute before; the other implores us to do what we can for the victim, but to leave him to his fate. As the hurt is but slight, we take back both in our carriage, and find that

we have made the acquaintance of—whom do you think?—the first tenor of the Grand Opéra, and the star of the Théâtre Français.”

“After all, perhaps adventures as you invent them are the most amusing. At my age, one doesn’t want shocks and commotion.”

“And you are not like poor me. You are not a novice in romance, a spinster; you have already tasted the sweets of love!” said Eugenia, with an air of mock sentiment.

Mrs. De Robert smiled an odd smile.

“Humph! the sweets of love, as you call them! Shall I tell you, Ivey, the only loverlike speech my poor dear Affie ever made me in his life? It was on our honeymoon. He said, ‘Do you know how it came about that I fell desperately over head and ears in love with you?’ ‘I have not the remotest idea,’ said I. ‘Well,’ said he, ‘it was when the horse shied that day I drove you to the station. Out you jumped—I never saw anything nimbler in my life—showing the neatest ankle imaginable. I vowed I would marry you if you would have me.’ Now, Ivey, you are a sensible girl. You have your wits about you. Can you imagine a man being such a fool as to marry a woman for no better reason than that?”

“It was amiable; it was appreciative.”

“Ah! he was amiable enough—my darling Affie! One must die to be a darling; I never thought him one whilst he lived. ‘Affie!’ I would call from my bedroom door—‘Affie, love, come and lace up my stays!’ and, no matter what he was about, he always came running like a hare. Yes: one must die to be a darling, Jenny; and that you will find out.”

"Fortunately, it is not a compliment we can enjoy when paid to ourselves," Eugenia answered.

"It is a compliment no one shall pay me," laughed Mrs. De Robert. "That is why I want to dispose of the De Robert property, and be free to make ducks and drakes of my own. But, Eugenio, if nobody comes to claim this something to their advantage, what then?"

Mrs. De Robert had an odd habit of calling people by any other name than the right one. The nearest approach to correctness in Miss Ivory's case was "Eugenio," only made use of when weighty matters impended.

"Never fear!" answered the oracle. "Wait a week, and the place will swarm with claimants. The Social Science Congress, the Church Convocation, the Salvation Army, and other dreadful invasions of the last year or two will be nothing to them."

"You make my hair stand on end!" ejaculated Mrs. De Robert. "What shall we do with them all? I begin to feel that I have done an imprudent, a wild thing."

"Anything is better than twirling your thumbs and doing nothing," rejoined Eugenia. Then she sighed. "I feel it, Roberta—cosy as we are at Hopedale, we are gradually deteriorating; another year or two of this existence would make us dull as oysters. We want contact with other minds, fresh experiences of human nature—the good, the bad, and the indifferent."

"You are right there. Poor dear Mr. Bacchus, for instance. A worthier man never twaddle-dum-dee'd in the pulpit; yet how tired we are of him! And the Vicar? What is there to say against the Vicar, except that he does not entertain us?—just that, and nothing

more. If I thought he would ever succeed in entertaining you, no inducement would make me leave this dead-alive place."

"Lovers should never belong to the same parish," was the reply. "They should sigh for each other from afar, like the palm and the fir-tree in the legend; not be near neighbours, like cabbages in the same garden. It is naughty of me to say so; but, when in *l'le-à-l'le* with the Vicar, I feel that we are both as uninteresting as cabbages."

"He does not, I am sure. Never had any man a better opinion of himself, or of you. There he is at the garden-gate, with a letter in his hand—from some claimant, of course. You may be sure of one thing, Ivey: we shall have a hundred famished rats after our morsel of cheese."

"Let them come," said Eugenia, blandly. "'Twill be hard if we don't find one with *esprit* out of the number."

The Vicar of Hopedale presented a striking contrast to his neighbour, the Curate of Briardale. Everything about the Hon. Rev. Algar Meridian was correctness itself—name, appearance, deportment. Most people, indeed, would have thought Miss Ivory extremely fastidious to compare him for a moment to a cabbage. Good-looking, well-read, affable—how could she or any other woman possibly find fault with him! He was a clergyman, it is true, and his conversation had to be toned down accordingly; quitting such subjects as Mr. Ruskin's latest utterance, or Mr. Browning's last poem, for old women's flannel petticoats, the parochial lying-in-bag, and the cropping of little girls' curls at the Sunday-school. It was his misfortune, not

his fault, if he felt obliged to quote Scripture now and then, whether occasion served or no. Being a clergyman, it was hardly his fault either that duty exacted short drawing-room sermons to the more mundane of his lady parishioners. Miss Ivory, for one, had to be reproved for her persistent, her wilful, indifference on the subject of school-children's curls, the parochial funeral bonnets, blankets, and so forth.

"Good-day, Mr. Meridian!" was Mrs. De Robert's blunt greeting. "I hope, for once, you are going to enliven us. Are they beginning to come? and who are they?"

"Not commonplace mortals like ourselves, surely?" smiled Eugenia, as she rose and held out a fair hand to the Vicar. "Do not tell us we are to be thus cruelly disenchanted."

"Miss Ivory seems to expect that heroes of romance are as plentiful in real life as blackberries," Mr. Meridian said, smiling away the edge of his sarcasm. "Nothing short of a Monte Christo, or at least an Edward Rochester, will satisfy her. Well, I am sorry to say apple-dumplings and not ambrosia must be your fare to-day."

Miss Ivory had ever a sarcasm to fling at him in return.

"It is at least something to know which is which. You grant me that?"

"Do tell us all about it!" put in Mrs. De Robert, eyeing the letter.

The Vicar, still looking at Miss Ivory, retorted teasingly:

"Whom should you expect but a batch of poor curates, with a dozen children apiece; or half a dozen

widows from Bath, with a phalanx of marriageable daughters?"

"Well, at any rate, they are not Hopedale folks. There will be the charm of freshness, of a certain kind of novelty," replied Eugenia coldly.

"Come, Mr. Meridian, out with your news! who is first in the field?" asked Mrs. De Robert, beginning to lose patience.

Mr. Meridian thereupon, putting on an expression as grave as if he were about to preach a Lenten sermon, began.



## CHAPTER IV.

### ON THE "QUI VIVE."

"THE text of this letter I need hardly give entire," said the Rev. Mr. Meridian, with a slightly pompous air; "the writers, Miss Sabina Ricketts and Miss Prudence Perfect——"

"Heaven bless us and save us!" cried Mrs. De Robert, ready to burst forth with fury. "Are we to have all the gossiping old maids from the four quarters of the globe? They must go home, pack and baggage. I'll not give them a penny!"

"They seem to be very estimable ladies," pursued the Vicar, in a tone of mild reproof; "there can be no doubt of that. Deserving objects——"

"Deserving objects are not what I am on the lookout for," Mrs De Robert cried, growing more and more irreful. "What I want is my late husband's next of kin, his heirs-direct; their circumstances and deserts have nothing to do with me."

"These poor ladies seem to be the very persons wanted," pursued the Vicar. "Their papers are in order; that is to say, their relationship to the late lamented Mr. De Robert is clearly made out."

"They are spinsters. Their names are not his. I must have a married man, with sons to inherit the fam-

ily heirlooms—or *nobody*," blurted out Mrs. De Robert, in high dudgeon.

"Unfortunately, we cannot fabricate these husbands and fathers to order," smiled Eugenia serenely; "and, after all, next of kin is next of kin. Petticoats and chimney-pot hats have nothing whatever to do with the matter."

"But names have. The property must go to a De Robert, and to no one else," retorted Mrs. De Robert. "I am sure there must be a genteel young man of the true stock somewhere."

"But what if we cannot lay hands upon him?" Eugenia said, softening down matters as best she could. "We must content ourselves with Miss Sabina Ricketts and Miss Prudence Perfect. And, who knows? There are spinsters even more interesting than your genteel young men." Thus saying, she glanced at the Vicar.

"And far more malicious," was his tart reply. "However, my dear Mrs. De Robert, as the poor ladies are here, what am I to say to them?—what am I to do with them?"

"Don't come to me for advice," Mrs. De Robert answered waspishly. "They are not next of kin in the sense I intended. What good can family heirlooms do a pair of single women with one foot in the grave?"

"Nay, their respective ages hardly warrant such an assertion as that," said Mr. Meridian: "let me read the dates to you from their certificates of baptism."

"Throw their certificates of baptism in the fire, for aught I care! Selina Beckett and Patience Purfle are nothing to me, I say," Mrs. De Robert replied. "The best thing they can do is to go back whence they came."

Both Mr. Meridian and Miss Ivory were accustomed to these bursts of temper, which might well have disconcerted a stranger. Eugenia now put in, as gravely as if Mrs. De Robert were herself in the sweetest of humours:

"I don't think, Roberta dear, that you could well let the ladies go without first paying them some attention—say, inviting them to tea!"

"As you please. You and Mr. Meridian can settle the matter between you; only don't expect me to entertain."

Miss Ivory smiled encouragingly upon the Vicar.

"You will come to my aid, will you not?"

"Do I not ever turn my left cheek to the smiter?" was the reply.

"Beautifully. But about this important business of the tea, I had better let you know later. I will call at the Vicarage then, when Mrs. De Robert and I have talked the matter over."

"It requires no talking over. The sooner the better," said Mrs. De Robert.

"Unkind Mrs. De Robert! you will not, then, let me devise an errand to the Vicarage, in order to disturb the Vicar over his sermons—the only crosses of his bachelor existence!"

"If they were!" ejaculated Mr. Meridian; "but I must be going. Good-day, ladies! I remain inert till further orders."

Mrs. De Robert was about to make provocative retort; but, before she could fairly begin, her visitor was gone. Truth to tell, delightfully odious as the Vicar found Miss Ivory at all times, he did not relish the elder lady's ill-temper. The more the beautiful

Eugenia satirised him, the more adorable he found her; but Mrs. De Robert's tantrums upset his nerves and deranged his digestion. Human beings, to be properly understood, like the planetary bodies, must be taken at the proper angle. He had never discovered how to take Mrs. De Robert at the proper angle.

"Just like the Vicar! He can always find his way here when he has anything disagreeable to say. But, Eugenio, I tell you for once and for all, these tiresome, gossiping, cheese-paring old maids shall have nothing. You know what my darling Affie's wishes were—ah! one must die to be a darling, as I am always saying; I seldom thought him one whilst he lived. I say, you know what his wishes were."

"Wishes won't make the world spin backwards; and, though nothing would seem easier, seeing how stupid they are, you can't manufacture human beings to order," Eugenia said.

"I shall wait, then. It was agreed between us that, at some time or other, I should hand over the family plate, the jewels, the Murilly, and all the rest of it, to my husband's next of kin; and since my poor dear uncle died—there, again! when did I ever dream of calling him dear in his lifetime?—I have quite enough of my own."

"Moreover, we want to quit Hopedale and sally forth, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in search of adventure."

"Anything you like! Have it all your own way, Jenny," Mrs. De Robert replied, having now quite recovered her temper. "So long as I get rid of the cumbersome old silver (which, being at the bankers', might as well lie at the bottom of the river Jordan) and the

family jewels (of no more good to me either than a child's coral), I don't care. You see, but for Affie's feeling about these things, I should have called myself plain Sarah Roberts long ago. But he stuck to the *de* and the *fleur de lis* and the family motto as Father Abraham to the cave of Machpelah. He will never rest in his grave if they go to the wrong person."

"We will take good care of that. It would be hard indeed if he could not rest there," Miss Ivory said soothingly.

They chatted a little longer over these matters. Then, as soon as the afternoon sun slanted over the apple-trees and the garden was fresh and cool, Mrs. De Robert put on her sun-bonnet and betook herself to her favourite task of gathering gooseberries and peas. Meantime, Miss Ivory dressed herself and set out for the village.

The young lady's appearance created more interest and curiosity than the occasion would seem to warrant. She was worth looking at, certainly, whether rustically attired in broad-brimmed straw hat and light muslin gown, as to-day, or clad in one of those dark rich dresses she wore on wintry Sundays—pelisses of softest velvet, tippets of rarest fur. But the good villagers saw her pretty often all the year round. Why, then, in Heaven's name! should buxom Mrs. Cheeseman, the grocer's wife, quit her sugar-weighing to watch Miss Ivory well out of sight? Why should Miss Pry, the postmistress, generally as automatic in her movements as a sewing-machine, become suddenly agile as an eel at the first glimpse of Eugenia's parasol? And Mr. Boning, the butcher—most prosaic of mortals, whose mental vision seldom soared beyond a sirloin—how

came it about that he became all at once absorbed in Miss Ivory's movements, and quite indifferent to the leg of mutton he had just unhooked for a customer? The behaviour of what is called society exhibited the same inquisitiveness. Mrs. Leach, the doctor's wife, who contrived to see all that went on from her drawing-room window, watched the passer-by as if she were a phenomenon. The young ladies at the Lodge, daughters of the retired brewer, Mr. Tubby, at sight of their charming neighbour lost all interest in the croquet game. Mr. Hammer, the rich old auctioneer, now retired and received, as the phrase goes, dropped his newspaper and spectacles, and called to his wife in the adjoining room:

"Here comes Miss Ivory—Miss Ivory, my dear!"

Like poor Io in the Greek story, the beautiful Euginia was pursued by a hundred eyes. Not that they seemed in the least to disconcert her. On she tripped towards the Vicarage, bowing to this acquaintance, smiling to that, and roguishly affecting a look of mystery and importance.

Truth to tell, the subject uppermost in people's minds just now was this business of Mrs. De Robert's expected Next of Kin.

It was the first time anything had really happened in the village—that is to say, anything out of the common way. There was no conceivable reason why Hopedale folks should want anything to happen. In this enviable village matters invariably took their natural course. No one did what his fathers had not done before him. Youths and maidens paired off in proper prosaic fashion; elderly folks made their wills, and died in their beds. No one was ever known to run

away with his neighbour's wife, much less to poison his own. Yet, so insatiable is human curiosity, so blind the general desire to plunge into the unknown, that these misguided inhabitants of Hopedale became all at once dissatisfied.

No sooner was Mrs. De Robert's scheme published abroad than every soul in the place developed a morbid craving for excitement. Daily routine was suddenly found insupportable. Everybody found everybody else as dull as ditchwater. Ordinary affairs ceased to possess the faintest interest. Mrs. De Robert's next of kin, and the something they were to hear of to their own advantage, had fairly turned people's heads.

The merest bagatelle connected with this subject awakened intensest curiosity. The least relevant incident was speculated upon for hours. Morning, noon, and night the village was on the alert. Events of some kind or other must soon come to pass; and what events!

Maidens conjured up a welcome invasion of the other sex—beared hosts from remote corners of the globe, gallant Hussars from the Nilgherry Hills, sunburnt ranchemen from Texas; Australasia, too, would surely send its love-making contingent: indeed, except from Jupiter and the moon, whence might not an heir of the De Roberts be expected?

With older, prosier folks, speculation took a material turn. Upholsterer, carpenter, and mason were all reckoning up what jobs the new owners of Hopedale would give them; for of course the place would be thoroughly repaired and put in order by its new occupant.

The gardener, in advance of the rest, ordered a supply of exotics and ornamental shrubs from the nearest town. The creation of a flower-garden, in the modern sense of the word, would be one of the first things thought of.

Miss Cotton, the village milliner and dressmaker, had laid in a good supply of flowers and ribbons, thread, buttons, and tape. There would be plenty of picnics, pleasure-parties, weddings, ere the season was over. She believed all this as if she had read of it in the pages of the prophet Jeremiah. The big people, as well as the little, appropriated to themselves their full share of benefits.

Sir Percy Fitzallan, the largest land-owner hereabouts, had already in imagination added the De Robert estate to his own. It was exactly what he wanted to make his property neat and complete as a bandbox. Confound that irascible old woman! Why could she not sell it to him quietly, and hand over the proceeds to these heirs, if any turned up? Well, he should get it now; that was quite certain. Who, in his sober senses, would not thankfully exchange a ramshackle old house and a few hundred acres of poor land for a handsome sum down?

Mr. Gabell, architect, land-surveyor, and building speculator, was also already the new proprietor of Hopedale Manor—in so far, at least, as imagination was concerned. The neighbourhood was fast improving. Briardale promised to develop into a favourite summer resort. The Lake country lay within easy reach. Lastly, Mrs. De Robert's house was only a quarter of a mile from the parish church; and no one could say a word against the Vicar's doctrine—no



taint there! The outlay of a few hundred pounds would turn the place into the very thing for a retired Manchester man; "and it shall not slip through my fingers, if my name is Augustus Gabell," said the enterprising architect to himself.

One and another, the good people at Hopedale were in the mental condition of spectators gathered round a gaming-table. The *croupier* was at his post, the stakes were laid, the issues of the game no mortal could foretell.

## CHAPTER V.

### IN THE CURATE'S GARDEN.

“OH dear!” cried the Rev. Mr. Bacchus, “there is Miss Ivory and the Vicar! I had better leave you, I think; their business is sure to be with you, not me.”

Three days had elapsed since that tremendous adventure of the ditch, for tremendous it seemed to the two inexperienced travellers, Sabina Ricketts and Prudence Perfect. They were still under the Curate's roof, and still seemed likely to be.

“Really,” their host had said, on the second morning after their arrival—“really now, why on earth should you not stay on here? The friend I spoke of is not coming, after all, and I have let lodgings before. Well, not let lodgings exactly; but, in my poor wife's time, we always had some one with us who paid for everything—the same thing in the end.”

The two ladies blushed and stammered very much, finally screwed up courage to allude to payment. The Rev. Mr. Bacchus cut them short, and made their minds easy upon that score, and everything was comfortably settled. It was the greatest possible relief to him, he said; for, with only Jane in the house, he always came home expecting, like the Vicar of Wakefield, to find the place burnt to the ground.

The sight of the Curate's hat and great-coat hang-

ing up in the hall, Sabina said, reminded her of old days, of the lost Edwin. She could not understand how it was, but she always felt quite safe with a hat and great-coat hanging up in the hall.

As to Prue, she already looked and felt younger by years. She exuberated in the delicious, rejuvenating sense of romance. Not an hour under the Curate's roof, not an incident but was significant, touched with the spell of novelty and suggestion.

The chats over the frugal table, the taking part in the management of his house, the strolls with their host and the children—all these experiences were bewildering and delightful.

"Oh dear!" then cried the Curate, in a voice of positive alarm, "there is Miss Ivory and the Vicar!"

It was now evening, and peace brooded over the small domain. The baby was in its first sound sleep. Georgie, who put himself to bed whenever he chose, on this occasion had chosen to do it betimes. The rose-embowered cottage and straggling garden were bathed in the warm, amber light of parting day.

There seemed no reason why such perfect tranquillity should be disturbed by these visitors. The place, alike within and without, was just then orderly. There was nothing for the Curate to be ashamed of about his own appearance. He no longer had on his hands those domestic duties that entailed personal untidiness—the making of baby's puddings, or cooking the family dinner, and so forth. The errand of the two ladies, his inmates, and the fact of their sojourn under his roof had been duly announced at the Manor and the Vicarage. Why, then, should Mr. Bacchus shrink from Miss Ivory with looks so deprecatory, so apolo-

getic, as much as to say that he was very sorry, he felt everything about him was wrong and unsatisfactory—in fact, just the opposite of what things ought to be; but he could not help it—he could not, really?

The Vicar gave Miss Ivory his hand as she alighted from the basket-carriage, and fastened the pony to the gate; then the pair advanced towards their host with the smiling affability of intruders sure of a welcome. Eugenia's expression indicated something more. There was real cordiality, nay, feeling, in the look with which she now met the two timid, hesitating strangers.

"Dear me!" cried the Curate, "what am I thinking about, not to introduce you? I never know what I am thinking about, I am sure. Mrs. De Robert's relations—Miss Ivory, the Vicar of Hopedale."

"Ever reproaching yourself for imaginary shortcomings," Eugenia said. "Indeed, there was no need of introductions; but Mr. Bacchus will die of a tender conscience some day, I always tell him."

"Imaginary shortcomings, indeed!" replied the Curate, standing first on one foot, then on the other, with the look of the guiltiest mortal alive. Now he was red, then pale; one moment apparently on the verge of despair, the next relieved from some dire suspense.

"I had better leave you all, I had, indeed," he began again.

"On no account," smiled Eugenia. "Whilst the Vicar confabulates with our new friends, you must show me your roses."

Mr. Meridian turned from the pair with the assurance of a suitor who has no rival, so legible the thought, "If I cannot satisfy Miss Ivory's aspirations, who can?" He might almost have uttered it aloud.

Evidently not caring how long the Curate might detain Eugenia among his roses—only annoyed perhaps, that she should suffer herself to be so detained—he now gave his mind to the fulfilment of his errand.

“Miss Ivory will have a little conversation with you later,” he began, sitting down on the rustic bench beside the pair, “but not on matters of business. These my respected friend Mrs. De Robert leaves entirely in my hands.”

“Of course—certainly—we are much obliged to you,” Sabina and Prue said nervously. Was it possible that they were to learn their fate then and there?

Meantime, Eugenia and the Curate had reached the standard roses at the other end of the garden.

“I don’t know how it is,” said Mr. Bacchus: “my roses never turn out as well as other people’s, yet I give myself no end of trouble about them.”

“What fault can you possibly find with this?” asked Miss Ivory, bending over a magnificent Gloire de Dijon.

“Of course, if you find it perfection, I have nothing more to say; I am delighted,” answered Mr. Bacchus, bringing out his pocket-knife to clip it for her.

“That is not the point,” pursued Eugenia. “My opinion has nothing to do with the real merits of the rose. Where are the blemishes you allude to?”

He had offered her the rose, and she now held it up scrutinisingly.

“I don’t know that it has any blemishes,” he replied. “I hope not, I am sure, since you are good enough to accept it.”

Eugenia still held up his gift, smiling reproachfully.

“You have perceptions, at least I suppose so,” she

said. "You know if anything is beautiful or hideous, or if it appears beautiful or hideous."

"Oh, yes! I won't disown perceptions; I wish I could. How much happier people would be if they had no perceptions!—I often think that," rejoined the Curate.

"And I think exactly the contrary. It seems to me that the more perceptions we have, and the stronger they are, the happier we must be, as a natural consequence."

"Yes, you always think exactly the opposite of what I think," was the rueful reply. "I do wish for once, just for once now, that we two could think alike. It would be such a pleasure to me."

"We think alike about thousands of things," Eugenia said. "You believe, for instance, that two and two make four, and that the world turns upside down once a year; so do I. But if we talked from morning to night on such subjects, should we be any the wiser?"

"Why should people always want to be getting wiser?" asked Mr. Bacchus. "I never could conceive why myself."

"Why should people always want to be getting stupider?" rejoined Eugenia. "If the only object of conversation were to find out how many people think alike, the world would soon be peopled with brainless idiots."

"Oh dear!" cried the Curate, "that would be too terrible! I should not like to have the place swarming with brainless idiots. I often feel like one myself."

"Then," smiled Eugenia sweetly, "you see how advisable it is for the best of friends to lead a cat-and-dog life of it—conversationally, I mean. By this

means they sharpen each other's wits, and worry each other into a proper state of wideawakefulness."

"Pray worry me, then, as much as you please. I always feel that I want to be waked up."

"You are certainly wide awake when you graft your roses, however sleepy you are when you gather them," was the reply. "Your show is the finest I have seen this year."

"How kind of you to encourage me! That is just what I want—a little friendly encouragement."

"You may, then, give me as many roses as you please, if you call acceptance encouragement," Miss Ivory said, with a distractingly benevolent smile; and clip, clip, away went the Curate's pocket-knife devastating right and left.

"Stop, I entreat you!" cried Eugenia, aghast. "Must you have mathematical precision upon every occasion? Should I say, 'One white, one red, one yellow rose,' as if I were selecting French flowers in a milliner's shop, at sixpence apiece? I take these," she added, accepting half a dozen—"three for Mrs. De Robert and three for myself; and pray leave the rest where they are. You are much too generous."

"Am I really? Am I too much of anything? I only wish I could think so. I always feel exactly the reverse, as if I were too little, desperately little, next to nothing of anything. I often wonder how people feel who have a really first-rate opinion of themselves. It must be so agreeable, like coming into a fortune."

"It ought to be an easy thing to learn. We have plenty of examples," Miss Ivory rejoined, quietly satirical; then she glanced mischievously towards the group on the rustic bench.

All this time, furtive feminine glances from the rustic bench had followed the Curate and his guest.

Whilst the Vicar paid no attention whatever to the persiflage among the roses, and Sabina waited in an agony of suspense for his revelations, Prue's thoughts were in two places at once. Her interest in the disclosures to come was as keen as Sabina's; she listened with rapidly-beating heart for the next word Mr. Meridian should utter, but at the same time she was mindful of all going on at the other end of the garden. The Curate's proffered rose; the beautiful Miss Ivory's acceptance; her sparkling banter; his hesitation, more eloquent than ready speech; the cordiality existing between the pair—nothing was missed by that eager listener and looker-on.

Under other circumstances Prue would have checked these feelings, or so far mastered herself as to allow no betrayal of emotion; but could she, could any mortal, be expected to look calm and indifferent at such a moment? On the lips of the Vicar hung fate and destiny, the acme of fortune or humiliating disenchantment. Quite excusably, therefore, she might falter, change colour, tremble, and even show starting tears. The real cause of her agitation none could guess. Sabina too, Prue saw, with great satisfaction, was no calmer than herself. The little woman showed the strangest inclination to laugh and cry at the same time. As she afterwards told Prue in confidence, waiting for the Vicar's disclosures was like waiting for poor dear Edwin's offer over again. She had never forgotten how she felt when he was on the verge of speaking out: it was as if the earth had yawned at her feet; and it was as if the earth yawned at the feet of both now.



## CHAPTER VI.

### BONGO.

“ I MUST first explain,” began the Vicar, “ that Mrs. De Robert will not allow any claimants—unless, indeed, their number should prove legion—to be put to expense in this matter. At least, in your own case, the cost of this journey will be defrayed, whether it is made to good purpose or in vain.”

“ How kind, how considerate!” cried Sabina and Prue, in a breath.

So greatly were their minds relieved by this piece of intelligence that they felt as if they had come into a small fortune already. Both laughed aloud, but felt ready to cry the next moment. Those last words the Vicar had used—those ill-omened words, “ in vain”—seemed to scatter their hopes to the winds; and just then Prue saw Eugenia fastening the Curate’s rose to her dress.

“ You must kindly bear in mind that Mrs. De Robert is entirely a free agent in the disposal of her late husband’s property,” continued Mr. Meridian. “ It was legally willed to her without any conditions whatever, and she is bound by Mr. De Robert’s wishes only to cast about for an heir. Then there is the question of suitability”; and, as he said this, Mr. Meridian looked significantly and penetratingly at his hearers.

Sabina and Prue were once more on the verge of

tears. Yes, both felt already convinced that they had drawn blanks in a lottery. It was about as likely that they should be found suitable as that they should discover perpetual motion or invent a flying-machine. Prue glanced at the animated figures of Miss Ivory and her adoring cavalier with a sinking of the heart. Roses, adoration, the more poetic aspect of life, such things were not for her. Sabina thought of Edwin lying in his cold grave and resigned herself. The Vicar went on:

“The heir must be suitable, and the decision of such suitability rests with Mrs. De Robert herself. In the natural order of things, an heir-direct may be of either sex; but, in this case, not only a continuer of the race is wanted, but one in whose person the race will in all likelihood be continued. Mrs. De Robert hopes, in fact, to find a male descendant of the family.”

“Of course, we quite understand; how stupid of us not to think of it!” ejaculated the pair, trying in some degree to veil their discomfiture.

They had told themselves over and over again to expect such a disillusion; it was none the less hard to bear when it came.

“At the same time,” said Mr. Meridian, a kind-hearted man enough in his own way—to be kind-hearted in other people’s way is quite another matter—“you have taken a proper course in coming to Hopedale. Mrs. De Robert is the last person in the world to overlook that fact; and, if she is reluctantly compelled to waive your claims to the property *in toto*, she will not, I am sure, permit you to go back empty-handed.”

The last piece of information was balm of Gilead indeed. Sabina looked delighted beyond measure.

Prue's eyes brightened; then she glanced towards the standard roses, feeling that, after all, although it did not matter in the least—although, as Sabina said, nothing really mattered—a fifty-pound, a twenty-pound, aye, even a ten-pound note, would be an immense comfort.

“Mrs. De Robert will act honourably—that is what I meant to say,” added the Vicar. “She will not let you be losers by this journey. Into particulars of the nature and value of the property I am not now at liberty to enter. All these facts will be communicated later, when other claimants have come forward.”

He seemed to have done speaking, when an odd smile rose to his lips. He was thinking of the contrast presented by his own statement of the case and the way in which Mrs. De Robert had just put it. What would these two timid ladies think could they hear her tirades?

“There is yet one point I am bound to hint at,” he said, rising. “My respected friend is somewhat whimsical and peculiar. You must not allow yourselves to be disconcerted, much less affronted, by anything she may say. Mrs. De Robert is disappointed at having so far failed in her object, at the non-appearance of the wished-for heir. She will not, perhaps, receive you as cordially as a kinswoman should; but pray take no notice of her singularities, which really mean nothing—I mean, nothing to object to seriously.”

Mr. Meridian paused, feeling, as well he might, that he had performed his task in the best possible manner. How poor Mr. Bacchus would have blundered and stumbled and castigated himself over it! How he would have omitted particulars, and blundered out indiscretions! It was satisfactory to the Vicar to feel that what he

did was ever well done. No wonder that he enjoyed an undisturbed digestion and unbroken calm of mind!

Eugenia now came up with her hands full of roses, the Curate following.

"I am sure I have detained Miss Ivory too long," he said apologetically. "I don't know how it is; I always do detain people too long."

"Some people, I presume," replied Mr. Meridian; he was always suavity itself, almost patronising indeed, to this poor, over-conscienced, hesitating Mr. Bacchus. The wonder was, often laughed the Vicar, that Mr. Bacchus had ever possessed decision enough to come into the world at all.

"On the contrary, however," he added pleasantly, "I have only just finished what I had to say."

"Only just," said Sabina and Prue, both rising to greet Miss Ivory.

"And I can do no more than begin what I have to say, leaving the rest till to-morrow—no, to-morrow is Sunday; till the day after to-morrow, then," said Eugenia. "Mrs. De Robert hopes you will come on Monday and take tea with us in the garden. I am sure Mr. Bacchus will be delighted to drive you."

How could she be sure, thought Prue, unless—unless— And yet was it at all likely that this handsome girl could favour the suit of a poor Curate, a widower, moreover, with two children?

No, Eugenia only spoke with the happy unconcern of youth, good looks, and prosperous circumstances. She might be something to Mr. Bacchus, but Mr. Bacchus could never be anything to her.

"How kind! We shall both be delighted!" Sabina

replied, looking at Prue, wondering why she did not answer for herself.

"Then, as it is growing late, we had better take leave of our friends," Eugenia said to the Vicar. Hands were shaken, friendly little speeches exchanged; Mr. Bacchus held her roses whilst Mr. Meridian helped her into the pony-carriage, then they set off.

To drive across country in a gig with a handsome woman was the great Johnson's ideal of worldly enjoyment.

Very likely the Rev. Mr. Meridian would have held the same opinion, if only Lewti would be kind, as Coleridge's poem runs. "For Lewti never will be kind" was an idea wholly unacceptable. With the wilfulness, too, of human nature, he wanted in the beautiful, piquant Eugenia the very qualities he acknowledged insipid elsewhere—feminine acquiescence, that deference due from the intellectually weak to the intellectually strong, that smiling submissiveness and blushing appeal of which he had enough and to spare whenever he went into society. The Vicar of Hope-dale came of good stock; he was handsome, agreeable, of easy circumstances, and quite sure, sooner or later, to be preferred. More than one girl tried her best to please him, but none pleased except Miss Ivory; and she would never try.

"Do let me drive you," she said, as soon as they were fairly on the way.

To refuse this request would have been hardly courteous, as the pony-carriage belonged to himself. He handed her the reins, and leaned back, looking at her with a discommending, almost supercilious smile.

"It always amuses me immensely," he said, "this

assumption of superiority on the part of your sex. In the matter of driving, for instance. Why, in the name of good sense, must you ever want to make the man sitting beside you look like a poor incapable?"

Eugenia did not reply immediately. She always relished the taste of handling the Vicar's reins. The pony had spirit, and went well. The road was uphill and downhill, but broad and smooth. She got the animal into an expeditious humour, and away they rattled, as if their very lives depended on reaching Hopedale in a given space of time. Then she turned to make answer:

"If you want an uncharitable speech, go to a clergyman for it, I say. Cannot a woman indulge in a little harmless amusement without a mean motive?"

"Don't turn me over into the ditch," said the Vicar.

Eugenia, it must be confessed, liked to go perilously near angles in driving, to round a corner in a manner that made her companion tremble, to all but graze the wheels of passing vehicles.

"I think it would do everybody all the good in the world to be turned into a ditch now and then!" she replied, thinking at the same time that she should not choose to be thrown into a ditch with the Vicar.

Mr. Meridian sat half-wishing that the pony would for once deceive its daring conductress in her reckoning. Always supposing that only a bruise or two, and a few breakages in the harness, came of it, he would have quite enjoyed a misadventure—Miss Ivory so richly deserved it. The provoking part of the business was that no woman ever more graced a gig than Eugenia. As she sat bolt upright minding her reins, any passer-by must have turned to take a second look at that charming

figure. There was much more than mere grace and feminine bewitchingness here. The fair, animated face, shaded by the straw hat; the figure, slender yet strong—these were attractive enough in themselves, but far more so for what they indicated: an alert understanding, a generous initiative, nobleness in little things, a high, daring spirit.

Mr. Meridian chose not to fit the proffered cap.

"Poor Bacchus, for instance!" he said. "His ideas want shaking up, like the fragments of glass in a kaleidoscope."

"I am sure I cannot conceive why you should always pity Mr. Bacchus," Miss Ivory said, driving with more apparent recklessness than ever. She knew perfectly well what she was about, but delighted in giving Mr. Meridian a succession of little frights. "He possesses those very virtues you exhort us to on Sundays—humility, modesty, and so forth."

"Mind that gate, for Heaven's sake!" interposed the Vicar.

This time, indeed, a collision seemed inevitable. The wheels all but grazed the gate-post. They were safe, however, and he breathed freely.

"We can't admonish wool-gathering wits in the pulpit," was his reply. "I was thinking of our poor friend's mental shortcomings, absence of mind, inappropriateness of speech; in fact, you know well enough what was in my thoughts."

Eugenia would not have the Curate depreciated just then. She knew that Mr. Meridian really meant well towards Mr. Bacchus. He had often done him a good turn; but, although tolerably free from jealousy, he could never bear to hear him praised by Miss Ivory.

"I like everything about Mr. Bacchus—even his name," she retorted viciously.

"Well," rejoined the Vicar, growing vicious in turn, "he is not at all likely to be a bishop; that is one comfort. Bishop Bacchus! would you like the sound of that?"

"Yes," replied Eugenia quite gravely. "It would be a precedent. I like precedents. Bishop Bacchus preaching in London would remind one of St. Paul at Athens—Heathendom and Christendom met together."

They had now left the glint of silvery sea and parting hills far behind. On either side stretched cool, dewy pastures and larchwoods, their arrowy tops clearly outlined against the pure, pale sky. Night was fast coming on; with every moment the hour grew more tranquil and beautiful, more romantic also. The Vicar began to grow impatient. Was this long, delicious drive to be occupied with unprofitable quarrels?—alas! not in any sense lovers' quarrels. Self-confident although he was, he wanted to feel surer of his ground; to make, in fact, a beginning of what he felt was destined to be an end.

"Bacchus, then," he replied amiably, "shall become a bishop to please you. That we will consider settled. But to change the subject. You do not mean to say that as soon as Mrs. De Robert has got this business off her hands, you both intend to forsake us altogether?"

They had reached a bit of newly-mended road, and Miss Ivory was compelled to let the pony go at a snail's pace. She answered in those matter-of-fact tones with which she was wont to utter the most startling statements.

"We are indeed! We have made up our minds to undertake a voyage of exploration in Central Africa."



"You are making fun of me!" the Vicar replied almost morosely.

"Why should I make fun of you?" Eugenia said, looking him full in the face. "I do assure you this is our intention, provided I can keep Mrs. De Robert up to it. We have talked over the matter of our travels for months past. Neither of us has ever been out of England as yet. We want to see something wonderful, and what can we see wonderful nearer home? Switzerland, Norway, Italy—every school-girl knows these places by heart nowadays. When Mrs. De Robert and myself set forth, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in search of adventure, we mean to do it in right good earnest."

"And Quixotic I much fear your adventures will be," Mr. Meridian said, unable to conceal his vexation.

Not appearing to see her companion's discomfiture, she continued:

"There is one spot on the surface of the globe I would imperil my life to see, from motives of sheer curiosity; and I have almost succeeded in working Mrs. De Robert up to an equal pitch of enthusiasm. Did you ever hear of a place called Bongo?"

"No more than the man in the moon!" was the ruffled reply.

Truth to tell, Mr. Meridian wished Bongo at the bottom of the sea. They were provokingly near the village. The evening star shone. Could any hour be more propitious for speaking out? But Bongo—Bongo! Eugenia would harp on the hateful theme, hardly letting him put in a word.

"I read an account of Bongo in a book of travels some time ago, and it has haunted me ever since," the young

lady went on. "Fancy a lovely, parklike wilderness——"

"You shall tell me all about Bongo another time," Mr. Meridian managed to edge in. "I want just now to talk——"

"Do listen!" Eugenia said, warming to her subject. "Fancy beautiful rivers, with wonderful birds! the osprey, the snake-necked cormorant——"

"All very interesting, no doubt," Mr. Meridian interrupted snappishly. "Only it happens that——"

"And then the vegetation!" Eugenia added, not appearing to hear him. "Lofty sycamore, fig, and acacia trees; and, sporting about the glades, the giraffe and the antelope——"

"A marvellous place, indeed! but one moment now——"

The first white cottage of Hopedale gleamed amid the dusky shadows, scents of lilies and roses betokened villa gardens, and still Eugenia would talk of nothing but Bongo.

"And the flowers! The ground is carpeted with them in a day. Fruit, too!—we should almost live upon fruit at Bongo——"

"It all sounds delightful in the extreme," the Vicar got in. "I shall like to read the account you refer to, if you will kindly lend it to me. Do, however, just——"

"I can't think anything but Bongo at this moment," Miss Ivory answered. "You see, claimants are sure to turn up plentiful as blackberries. Mrs. De Robert's affairs will be settled in no time, and I must get her to start whilst she is in the humour. And Bongo——"

The Vicar's patience was fairly exhausted. They

were now in the middle of the village, and the Manor House lay only a quarter of a mile off. That detestable, that—but for his calling—damnable Bongo had spoiled his drive. He heartily wished that African discovery had been reserved for another epoch. Mungo Park, Bruce, Livingstone, Stanley, Cameron—why could they not keep their adventures to themselves?

“And Bongo,” resumed Eugenia, with great animation, “should be visited in winter-time—in February at the very latest. Now, if I can only prevail upon Mrs. De Robert to embark in this enterprise, we must start in October.”

Mr. Meridian laughed derisively.

“Is it at all likely? At Mrs. De Robert’s age! Such a journey! Two ladies starting alone for Central Africa! The very idea is preposterous!”

“All new ideas seem preposterous,” Eugenia answered, as she quickly and neatly turned the sharp corner leading to the Manor House gate—“to some minds, I mean.”

Then they bade each other good-evening, Eugenia’s last words being:

“You shall be sure to have that account of Bongo the first thing on Monday morning.”

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE MYSTERIOUS LETTER.

THEN followed Sunday; and what a day of peace it might have been, but for Mrs. De Robert's "next of kin" and the "something they were to hear to their advantage"! Not at all likely that these hungerers and thirsters after fortune, no matter to what creed or quarter of the globe they belonged, should exercise Sabbatarian reserve, keep back their claims and pedigrees till the Monday. Could Mrs. De Robert expect of this summoning of spirits from the vasty deep anything else but the cloud no bigger than a man's hand that should develop into an army? Should not any of us, if we advertised for heirs-direct, look for the very heavens to be darkened with them, as with a plague of locusts? What could have induced her to take initiative so daring? Why could she not have enjoyed her husband's property whilst she lived, and let his next of kin squabble over it as they list after her death? Many were her reasons for a line of conduct so opposed to humdrum common sense and tea-table philosophy.

In the first place, Mrs. De Robert wished to please her "Eugenio," and "Eugenio" was bent upon seeking "romance and adventure." Romance, in the ordinary acceptance of the word, she did not want.

There are some women, place them no matter where you will, who straightway find as many admirers as they can count on their fingers; and the beautiful Miss

Ivory belonged to this category. And there are some women the more homage of a certain kind they get the less they care about it; and Miss Ivory belonged to this category also. She did not in the least want any man or any number of men to sentimentalise about her. She was ready enough to tease them for their pains, but her mind was full of other things. She yearned after romance and adventure of a wholly different kind. This sociable, comfortable, careless life at Hopedale was well enough in its way. No possible fault could be found either with the place or the people, but she wanted to be able to compare places and people, life and the world, with the descriptions given of them in books—in fine, to fashion her own existence, outline it, colour it, touch it up to please herself. Now, till the present time, such choice had not been possible.

The setting forth, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in search of adventure, is not easy upon modest means. When at last Miss Ivory became sole mistress of her own fortune, and Mrs. De Robert inherited so much money as to make her quite independent of her late husband's property, the two could put their heads together and scheme.

The first thing to be done, Eugenia declared, was to find the wished-for heir; and, the family heirlooms satisfactorily disposed of, they should be free to go where they liked and stay as long as they pleased. Mrs. De Robert had no sentimental scruples about quitting Hopedale. She did not wish to end her days in this North-country village just because Mr. De Robert had tempted her thither twenty years ago—tempted her from Bath, ease, and spinsterhood—sometimes secretly looked back upon with regret.

Eugenia, orphan daughter of Mrs. De Robert's oldest friend, was still more untravelled. She had not yet been as far south as Bath. No wonder, therefore, that Bongo had such attractions for her. Yes, it was settled: they would go to Bongo, and there spend delightfully Eastern days, after the manner of Lady Hester Stanhope and Lady Duff Gordon. Nothing short of Bongo would satisfy Eugenia, and nothing short of satisfying Eugenia would content Mrs. De Robert.

That Sunday! The household would never forget it!—one memorable episode out of many in the wonderful history of Mrs. De Robert's next of kin, and the something they were to hear to their advantage. It was a perfect summer morning, and, as usual, Eugenia strolled in the garden before church. Hopedale Manor, although a childless, was not a catless, dogless household. At Eugenia's heels followed a couple of pet dogs, who regretfully recognised the fact that it was Sunday, and that therefore they must not follow their mistress beyond the garden gate. The sagacious animals could sniff a prayer-book as well as any born Methodist.

A very Ethiop of a cat sunned itself on the wall. Tame pigeons peopled the place. Hens cackled in the farm-yard close by. Eugenia looked hither and thither in search of an appropriate flower. Her dress was of that pale amber colour so becoming to dark hair and pearly complexion. She chose a flower-head of deep violet petunia, and was adjusting it to her button-hole when Mrs. De Robert's voice was heard at the side door.

"Jenny, Jenny!" she cried, with much animation, "do come indoors! Another!"

Eugenia obeyed the summons alertly. She knew well enough what that word "another" meant. The plot thickened. A new claimant was in the field. Bongo seemed already leagues nearer. Mrs. De Robert, like Eugenia, was dressed for church. The Vicar never told her anything, she said, she had not heard a dozen times before. But church-going, if it taught nothing else, at least taught resignation. Yes, folks ought to go to church in order to learn how to be bored with a good grace! So she growled and grumbled; but, as regularly as Sunday morning came round, put on black silk gown and velvet mantle, and went to church all the same. She now held up an open letter.

"The Vicar has just sent this. I don't suppose he will bring any more letters himself," she said, with a grim laugh, thinking how badly she had received him the day before. "But read it, do, Jenny! I can make neither head nor tail of it myself."

Mrs. De Robert had wisely interposed Mr. Meridian as a moral buffer between herself and these terrible next of kin. In order to avoid possible unpleasantness, all applications were to be made in the first instance to the Vicar. No one could communicate with Mrs. De Robert except through his mediation, and all letters came under cover to the Vicarage.

The ladies re-entered the house. Eugenia closed the door of the breakfast-parlour, laid down her flower-scissors, and began to read:

"GIBRALTAR, July 13, 1875.

"MADAM AND DEAR COUSIN——"

"Some flattering fibbergib that!" broke in Mrs. De Robert. "However, go on. We can't expect next of

kin to be angels and archangels. We are all like so many dogs hanging on to a bone when it comes to a legacy. But let me have the rest."

With great relish, evidently wishing not one but twenty such letters would come every day, Eugenia continued:

" 'Under cover to your respected Vicar——' "

"The specious, double-faced, smooth-tongued hypocrite! Not a penny he shall get, Eugenio, mark my word! How does he know whether the Vicar is respected or not? and, respected or not, what can it matter to him? Go on, my dear."

" 'According to the instructions conveyed in your esteemed advertisement——' "

"The blarneying backslider! I'll warrant you he is that!" Mrs. De Robert jerked out, growing more and more wrathful.

She wanted these worthy people to come forward; but the faster they came, the less she liked it.

" 'I now write to say that I have got my pedigree in order, and start overland by next mail——' "

"Lord help us!" Mrs. De Robert ejaculated. "I'll tell you what, Jenny: we will go to Bath, and leave Mr. Meridian to battle with it. The place will soon swarm with them; they will be at loggerheads one with another. It will be worse than battle, murder, and sudden death. No, could I have foreseen all this, I would not have advertised, for a thousand pounds."

Eugenia continued to read with the same alertness (the letter interested her greatly):

" 'For the home of my ancestors——' "



"Ancestors! fiddle-de-dee! What business has he to have any ancestors, I wonder!" Mrs. De Robert cried irefully.

"He could not grow on a tree, like a chestnut," remonstrated Eugenia mildly, and went on with her letter:

" 'It will give me the utmost possible gratification to make your acquaintance——' "

"The only gratification he shall get out of me! I can tell him that beforehand!" Mrs. De Robert cried, with one of her meaning looks.

" 'And whilst, at the same time, I do not conceal from you the fact that any substantial benefits accruing from my visit will be joyfully welcomed, you may rest assured that they will be put to truly Christian uses——' "

"I dare say! Converting the Jews, clothing the Zulus, teaching poor innocent Fijians to besot themselves with gin! He is a missionary or something of the kind, I'll warrant you! Not a silver groat shall he have, if my name is Sarah Roberts!"

" 'Meanwhile, commending you to Heaven——' "

"Hocus-pocus!" was the vindictive retort. "As my poor mother used to say, true religion consists in minding your own business. He shall go back quicker than he came, and with a flea in his ear too, mark my word! Well, finish the letter, and then I will put it into the kitchen fire."

" 'I remain, madam and dear cousin, yours devotedly, John Fitz Henry De Robert——' "

"Fitz Gimcrack! Why can't people go about the world without such a mouthful of names? Come, Ivey, burn the letter, and let's be off to church!"

Miss Ivory was examining the signature with great attention.

"'John Fitz Henry De Robert, S. J.': Senior Junior—no; he would not be both at the same time. I am fairly puzzled, Roberta. The name is followed by two initials which look like S. J. Now, what can the letters S. J. stand for?"

"S. for Slyboots, and J. for Jackass! That is how I learned in my cross-row, and it is near enough now, depend on it!"

"No," Eugenia replied, with eyes still bent on the superscription. "These letters must have a meaning. S. stands for many things, Sergeant-Major, Surgeon-Dentist—heaps of words; but what J. can stand for immediately after S., I am at a loss to conceive. Let me think. Let me conjecture."

"Well, you can think in church. Mr. Meridian won't prevent you, I am sure," Mrs. De Robert said. "Into the fire with it, and let's be off!"

But Eugenia would not rest satisfied till she had solved the problem. She gazed upon those mysterious symbols as intently as people look into their hats on entering church.

"I have it at last!" she cried, with great animation. "What else should S. J. mean but the Society of Jesus? Yes, there is not a particle of doubt! The new claimant is a Jesuit!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### OIL ON TROUBLED WATERS.

“**T**HEN he shall not enter these doors! His shadow shall not darken my garden!” Mrs. De Robert exclaimed, alike patience and fortitude fairly spent. “You draw the line where you please, Eugenio; Mr. Meridian, ditto. I draw mine at thumbscrews and the Inquisition.”

Thereupon she sat down and flung off bonnet and Sunday mantle. The bonnet went to one end of the room, the mantle to the other. Her prayer-book, with silver clasp, touched the ceiling and fell down again. Her parasol flew out of the window, overturning a vase of flowers and shattering it into a dozen pieces. She always flung things about when in a passion. Perhaps, after all, the habit has virtue in it. Better set plates and dishes clattering than friends and neighbours by their ears.

“Now, you know as well as I do, Ivey,” she continued, “that, whatever I am, I can’t be called a narrow-minded person. I don’t interfere with my neighbours. They may worship Gog and Magog, the Pope of Rome; be Jews, Mahometans, Buddhists, atheists, for all I care! But when you come to thumbscrews and *autos-da-fé* I feel ready to do as many poor creatures have been done by. I don’t say I would burn every Jesuit alive, but no doubt many of them deserve it.”

"My dear Roberta!" Miss Ivory said, in a voice of shocked reproach.

"I mean what I say!" Mrs. De Robert cried. "Much you have profited by reading history, Ivey, if you don't feel the same. Poor dear Galileo—Joan of Arc! Did you ever hear of 'em, pray?"

"Times have changed. The writer of this letter may be as mild as Mr. Bacchus himself," Eugenia interposed.

"The greater hypocrite he, then. You will never turn a hawk into a sparrow. He shall not cross my threshold! If I have to barricade the place as they do the streets of Paris during a revolution, I'll keep him out. I tell you what, Ivey," Mrs. De Robert added, in a voice of positive insinuation, "we two will start off to Bath, and leave Mr. Meridian to get rid of the wretch as best he can."

"I must say, I should like to see a real live Jesuit," Eugenia replied naively; "one has not such an opportunity every day."

"God be praised, no!" the elder lady said, once more working herself up into a fury; "nor of being cajoled by him either. You are mole-blind, Jenny. You don't see one inch before you. What does this conniver of evil, this leaguer with the Father of Lies, this aider and abetter of wickedness incarnate want? Poor dear Affie's money to go into the Pope's coffers, of course! My head should sooner——"

Mrs. De Robert's fingers were once more tingling with the desire to smash something, but nothing smashable stood handy. Her execration of Jesuits must be expressed by deeds, not words.

On the carved oak buffet stood some pieces of beautiful old plate—the old De Robert plate—teapot, sal-

ver, snuffers, and tray, that were kept in the house for use.

Mrs. De Robert first seized the teapot by the spout and threw it to the farther end of the room; the salver followed, spinning along the ground; last rattled the snuffers and tray.

"These are the things he wants—this Father Fitz Flibbertygib! Nice they look in their churches, the Papists think. And nice they may look, for all me! I tell you what, Jenny, my good girl: rather than a single ounce of the family plate goes to the Pope, I will have it melted down to line my own coffin with."

Eugenia looked at the fine old bits of George III. silver ruefully. They were battered before, and Mrs. De Robert's treatment was the very worst thing in the world for them. There they lay, shining resplendent on the crimson carpet.

"Why shouldn't I? My bones are as good as many of their relics, I'll answer for it! No, Eugenio," this was said cajolingly, "let us start away to Bath, and leave Mr. Meridian to deal with the Jesuit. The Vicar is a bit of a Jesuit himself. The pair will get on together like Jonathan and David."

Eugenia sat still, looking at the plate.

"I don't think we should find Bath so entertaining as Hopedale just now," she said. "Besides, what harm could a Jesuit—could a whole college of Jesuits—do you? One and all, they would be just as polite as Mr. Meridian."

"A fig for such politeness!" quoth Mrs. De Robert. "Give me instead crusty folks, but honest, I say! Well, if you won't go to Bath with me, I suppose here I must stay, willy-nilly."

"I will start for Bath with you to-morrow morning, if you like," Miss Ivory said pleasantly; "but the most disagreeable of these claimants, as I say, can do us no harm, and all may entertain us not a little."

"Those two old ladies, now, Selina Beckett and Patience Purfle"—so Mrs. De Robert insisted on mis-calling them—"as well expect blood from a stone as entertainment from *them!* Take my word for it!"

"They may get entertainment from us: it amounts to the same thing," Eugenia replied. "And just think what a delightfully exciting position is ours! Robinson Crusoe's suspense at sight of the footprint was nothing to it. He could in a measure tell who would turn up, but we cannot in the very least. All is pleasing uncertainty."

"One thing is quite certain: we are too late for church," Mrs. De Robert said complacently. "Well, it is the Vicar's own fault. He should have kept the letter till after service."

Eugenia took off her bonnet and scarf with a look of relief. Yes, it was pleasant for once to stay away from morning service. The weather was hot; the Vicar spared neither himself nor his congregation in the matter of sermon. No matter the time of the year, they must listen to the allotted portion, and with a good grace. Unwary drowsers were severely castigated from the pulpit.

"I wish you would do one thing, Jenny," added Mrs. De Robert (she had now quite recovered self-possession). "Just write a line to Selina Beckett and Patience Purfle. Tell 'em not to come till they are wanted. Let the whole lot hugger-mugger together—old maids, Jesuits, saints, sinners, Jews, and Gentiles." Seeing

that Eugenia hesitated, she went on: "It cannot matter a straw to them—these old ladies, I mean."

"Nay, they are not old; Miss Perfect at least——"

"Old or young, what matters it a straw? Poor as mice they certainly are; they shall not lose a farthing by this business, anyhow. The longer I keep them at the Curate's, the better they'll like it, no doubt. Say I am waiting for the plaguey priest. Say what you like, only do not let us be troubled with them till the last moment."

Thus enjoined, Eugenia sat down and penned an ingratiating little note of excuse to Sabina. Then closing the shutters, in order to keep out the too beneficent sun, she sat down in a low chair, indulging in reverie. Mrs. De Robert had retired to her room; she always read the morning service and a sermon of Jeremy Taylor's there when kept from church. The young lady was therefore alone.

What was she thinking about? What would any girl of high spirit think about under the same circumstances? She saw herself on the threshold of a new existence, already at the parting of the ways. This arrival of Sabina Ricketts and Prudence Perfect, and the letter from the priest, interested her chiefly as indications of what was to come. Other claimants were sure to follow. The De Robert property would finally be awarded. The departure from Hopedale seemed at hand; and departure from Hopedale meant so many fascinating things! It meant freedom, in the first place. Eugenia was the very last person in the world to yield to pressure of any kind. She knew that, if any unwelcome suit were proffered to her a dozen times, she should have decision of mind enough to say "No." Any woman

acting differently must be so weak-minded as not to deserve the management of her own affairs. Yet when she thought over the matter quietly, Miss Ivory felt that an indefinite stay at Hopedale meant involuntary compliance with the wishes of others.

That was how she put it to herself. A great poet has said, "Mighty is that goddess whose name is Propinquity"; and Eugenia quailed before the goddess of propinquity. The Vicar and the Curate were not attractive to her. Of the two, she preferred Mr. Bacchus. But while she stayed at Hopedale she was compelled to see a great deal of both; and she felt that, if she stayed on for ever, she should be let into one fatality or the other. Circumstances would force her to marry Mr. Bacchus in order to escape the solicitations of the Vicar, or to marry the Vicar in order to escape the solicitations of Mr. Bacchus. Would not Bongo—aye, the world's end—be a happier ultimatum? Other issues hung upon the appearance of a proper claimant. The seductions of freedom were not all negative. Escape from Hopedale meant much more than escape from clerical love-making. It meant glimpses into the world beyond; new experiences alike for the mind and the eye; a wider mental outlook; a more liberal, an airier social sphere. They might go to Bongo or—Bath, to Bongo or—Jerusalem. At any rate, they should leave Hopedale and Hopedale folk behind them. The going anywhere would be an initiative, a precedent.

Miss Ivory, like many a woman endowed with wit and character, revolted at the thought of leading a life exactly like thousands of others. "Why should I not choose my own life as well as my own dresses?" she said to herself. "I must be the best judge of what fits."



Thus she dreamed away three morning hours stolen from a sermon. Who shall say they were less profitably spent? If there is one theme worth dwelling on with seriousness and in solitude, surely it is life—a problem to some, a penny merriment to others; to the most part of us, alas! a mere plodding along dusty ways or jostling amid the crowd in the market-place.

## CHAPTER IX.

### STARTING FOR LODORE.

“ I HAVE a note, two notes, from Miss Ivory,” said the Curate on Monday morning. “ Mrs. De Robert hopes you will not go to Hopedale this afternoon. Dear me, how awkwardly I put it! I always do put things so awkwardly! She does not say that, of course. What she does say is, Would you kindly stay away for the present?—a very different thing.”

Sabina and Prue smiled, not seeing any very great difference. They began to think this unknown kinswoman of theirs must be a very odd person indeed; perhaps the less they saw of each other the better. Life was so agreeable, too, under the Curate’s roof that they were delighted to stay on indefinitely, especially as the visit, long or short, was to cost them nothing.

“ Mrs. De Robert wants to be left alone—what on earth am I saying!—Mrs. De Robert suggests that to fill up the time agreeably you should make a little expedition.”

Sabina and Prue were ready to giggle like a pair of schoolgirls at the thought of an expedition; but then came misgivings on the score of cost. Mr. Bacchus anticipated their thought.

“ You are not to put your hands in your own pocket; Mrs. De Robert won’t hear of that. But would you really like me to convoy you to Lodore, now? She proposes that I should convoy you to Lodore.”

Not a spot in the wide world these unsophisticated travellers more longed to see! Their cheeks glowed with pleasure.

Sabina said, shyly as a seventeen-year-old maiden:

“Had my Edwin lived”—already she had communicated her love-story of thirty years ago to the Curate—“how strangely things turn out!—had my Edwin lived, we should have visited Lodore on our honeymoon.”

“Really, indeed! The only drawback is this,” Mr. Bacchus put in: “I can convoy you there, but could not convoy you back again. Would you be able to get on without me, do you think?”

The bare notion of not being able to get on without the Curate would have made more critical listeners smile. To these gentle women, however, their host seemed a tower of strength. Was he not a man, and a clergyman?

“We will try,” Prue said, with an ingratiating smile. As it was delightful to be convoyed by the Curate, it was even more delightful to be thus set down as dependent on him.

“We should, of course, like your company all the time; but we will manage as well as we can without it,” she added.

“Mrs. De Robert wants you to be away a week, at least. I mean, Mrs. De Robert hopes you will make a journey of several days,” Mr. Bacchus blundered on. “Now, if poor Mr. Bates, the farmer, had only died last Thursday week, instead of last Thursday, I could have managed the thing nicely. As it is, I must get back by Wednesday morning for the funeral, unless I can find a substitute.”

Prue, motherlike, wanted to know what, meantime, would become of the children.

"Oh! I will get in Nurse Jones for a couple of days. She is quite blind, stone-deaf, and set fast with rheumatism, but is a wonderful protection in a house. My mind is quite easy about everything when she is once at the helm."

"What a comfort to have such a person handy!" said Prue.

"The greatest possible blessing to me, I assure you," returned Mr. Bacchus. "She knows exactly what is going on by instinct. She does without eyes, ears, and legs in a manner that is enough to make us ashamed of having them. Not ashamed, exactly; no, I did not mean that—ashamed of making no better use of them, I intended to say. So it is all settled, then. We are to set out the first thing to-morrow morning for Lodore. Whether we shall ever get there is quite another question."

"Is the journey so very difficult, then?" asked Prue, athirst for adventure, already sniffing it in the air.

"No, I cannot say that. It is easy enough to get to Lodore. But you know the old proverb about the cup and the lip! Nothing, you see, is really certain in this life—except that we must pay the tax-gatherer." Mr. Bacchus, smiling grimly, added, "Such unexpected things happen! Just think of the man who was to have been hanged yesterday for murdering his sweetheart! Nothing ever seemed more certain than that! Why, the very rope was round his neck when the hangman fell down dead himself. As there was no one else up to the business, he got off, and is now alive and well, like you and me."

"Poor darling!—penitent and grateful, I hope," Sabina sighed.

"And in another paper," the Curate went on, "yesterday's, I think—Georgie, fetch me yesterday's paper; the one baby half munched to pieces—there is an account *à propos* from the Far West. Two young men started across country in order to attend their uncle's funeral. As the distance was considerable, and as this uncle had left them a good sum of money, they purchased a spick-and-span dogcart and fine horse for the journey. When they got there, to their surprise, they found the old gentleman hale and hearty, having been only in a fit when taken for dead. The ungrateful nephews brought an action against him for the expense of the trap and their mourning suits. I hope they'll lose it, I am sure. I just mention these things to show that, when we start for Lodore, we are no more certain of getting to our journey's end than people who start for the North Pole."

"It is pleasant to start, anyhow," Prue said.

"Yes, I quite agree with you there. Nothing like a start to enliven the spirits, no matter what kind of start it may be. I am always ready enough for a start myself."

"Should we not write to thank dear, kind Mrs. De Robert?" asked Sabina.

The Curate made a queer grimace at hearing his old friend spoken of in these endearing terms.

"She hates letters; but I will write for you to Miss Ivory," he replied, with an alertness that disconcerted poor Prue. "Yes, I will write to Miss Ivory, and say that we start for Lodore the first thing to-morrow morning. I daresay we shall do no such thing. If we do, the train will miss the Windermere boat, and

the Windermere boat will miss the Keswick coach; and we shàn't get to Lodore any more than to Timbuktu. However, start we must."

That starting for Lodore with the Rev. Mr. Bacchus—Sabina and Prue would never forget the delightfulness of it. There was the packing up, to begin with; and not only the packing up for themselves, but for their fellow-traveller, and that fellow-traveller a man. To the artless minds of Sabina and Prue, a man seemed nothing less than mystery incarnate; the very clothes he wore had in their eyes something preternatural, and, in the case of a clergyman, almost sacred. With careful, even loving, fingers they mended the socks, ironed the shirts, and put buttons on the waistcoat destined for the Curate's valise.

It was the first time in their lives that such pleasing duty had fallen to their share, and they did it with right good-will. Nothing was left out of which the traveller could possibly stand in need. Motherlike, sisterlike, wifelike, the pair next directed their attention to the house and the children. Georgie must be indulged with the prettiest picture-book the village shop afforded. Baby was to have the excitement of a sixpenny drum. And Nurse Jones and Jane were not forgotten; little pleasures were arranged for them during their absence. Finally, they retired to their own rose-embowered chamber, and made ready for the morrow.

"I am quite sure of one thing," Prue said, as she sat on the bed arranging her frills. "Travelling may not make us wise—we can't all be wise; it was never intended we should be—but it does make us compressible. How many of the miseries of life arise from people not being compressible! Everybody wants more

than he has got of everything. They won't be accommodating, like carpet-bags."

"Yes," replied Sabina, "I have often reproached myself for not being more of a carpet-bag. In our own small way, we both want more than we have got, otherwise we should not be here—in quest of something to our advantage, I mean."

"And of course," philosophised Prue, "we don't want half what we already possess, if we could only be brought to believe it. What a small amount of luggage is to last us for a week! yet we could jog on with no more to the end of our days, were we really put to such shifts, and think ourselves rich too."

"And those are really rich who think themselves so," Sabina rejoined, as she rammed down another fat bundle into her already bursting carpet-bag. "Poverty, leaving out extreme cases, exists after all only in imagination. A man who has hardly a rag to cover him, or a morsel of bread to put into his mouth, is certainly poor, but nobody else that I can see. We want so little, so very little, when it comes to bare necessities!"

Sabina loved to lead Prue into a metaphysical labyrinth, and Prue equally loved the task of finding her way out.

"A roof to shelter us, a bed to lie on, clothes to wear, and food to eat—any rational being ought to be satisfied with these," Sabina went on. "And it is the same with everything; Lodore, for instance. Just because we both wish for nothing so much as to see Lodore, if we do see it we shall be as contented as if we had travelled round the world. We want only to wish for what we have, and we have exactly what we wish."

"That seems to me like putting the cart before the

horse," Prue answered. "And we can't always wish for what we have. If I had been unfortunate enough to be born with a humpback, I could not wish that."

"Yes, you would," Sabina replied. "That is to say, if you were a rational being, you would think the matter over, and find out that you could not have been born otherwise—I mean, consistently with the purpose of your destiny and the ulterior ends of creation."

"If we never do get to Lodore! Now, I could not wish that either," Prue said. "Nothing could make me, I am sure."

"You would wish it," Sabina answered. "You could not feel differently. You would ponder the matter over, and come to the conclusion that, after all, you had already seen so much more than many people, it could not reasonably be expected that you should see anything so wonderful as Lodore. So you would end by wishing not to have seen Lodore."

"I will begin by wishing to see it, anyhow," Prue said cheerfully.

Sabina's conclusions were apt to damp her spirits. She feared, if she listened much longer, she should really end in not wishing to see Lodore.

"I little thought," she added, "when a child at school I read that poem, I should ever see the waters—"

" ' Rising and leaping,  
Sinking and creeping, . . .

Recoiling, turmoiling and toiling and boiling,  
Thumping and plumping, and bumping and jumping.'

I wonder if they do so now! That is the reason why I think any one may wish to travel a little. We can't help wanting to see if things are like the description we read of in books—larger or smaller, better or worse.



Lodore, now, when we get there, if the waters don't come 'thumping and plumping, and bumping and jumping,' what a disappointment it will be! I shall feel ready to cry."

"We can't expect descriptions in books always to tally with the things themselves," Sabina replied. "As my poor dear Edwin said once—it was when Cousin Mary tried to persuade me to send for a bonnet she had seen at the market-town, because, as she said, it would exactly suit my complexion—'Bina,' he said, 'we know how things appear to our own eyes, from a ship on fire to a boot-jack; but how they appear to the eyes of others is ever a dark mystery.' So of course I did not send for the bonnet. I always followed his advice in everything. It is just the same with Lodore. The waters may have recoiled and turmoiled and boiled when Southey saw them, or he fancied they did; or they might have thumped and plumped, and bumped and jumped in former days, but have left off doing so now. So, I say we ought not to expect things to turn out like other people's descriptions, but just the reverse. I do, I am sure, in the case of Lodore."

"It will be Lodore, anyhow," Prue put in, "whether the waters roar like thunder or are as quiet as mice. That is one comfort. We shall have seen Lodore all the same."

"And if we don't get to Lodore at all, we shall get very near it. There is a great deal in that also," Sabina rejoined. "Nobody ever gets to the North Pole, but a good many explorers get very near it; and I dare say, if they reached the Pole itself, they would be none the wiser. So it is with Lodore."

## CHAPTER X.

### WHAT BEFELL THE CLAIMANTS ON THEIR WAY TO LODORE.

WONDERFUL to relate, they did get to Lodore. A score of misadventures, of course, happened to them on the road. At the last moment, the Curate was summoned to baptize a baby, and the departure had to be delayed till mid-day. From this small hitch in their arrangements arose many another. The mid-day train to Lakeside just missed the boat that caught the Keswick coach; consequently there was no such thing as getting to Lodore, or near it, that day. Then, as ill-luck would have it, no sooner had they decided to take the boat that did not catch the coach, instead of waiting for the boat that did, down came the rain as it can come down only in these districts.

Clouds black as pitch broke over their heads. The lightning, the thunder, the agitation of the lake, might have intimidated such travellers as Sabina and Prue under other circumstances; but the presence of the Rév. Mr. Bacchus reassured them as a talismanic charm.

Huddled together under the awning, with other mackintoshed tourists, they made light of the storm.

"Of course," said the Curate, "nobody ever expects to cross Windermere on a fine day! and what does not happen to more than one traveller out of a thousand, how could we expect it to happen to us? I should not feel that it was Windermere had it been fine; and,

when we get used to things, we like them, whether pleasant or no. I enjoy all this," he added, as he glanced at the little crowd of dripping fellow-travellers. "It is not sitting at home, twirling one's thumbs, anyhow!"

And of course, if Mr. Bacchus enjoyed it all, so did Prue. When he went on deck to watch the lightning play on the lake, she summoned courage to go also. The flashes were very vivid, the peals of thunder truly awful, the rain a positive water-spout; yet she stayed; and the more deafening the thunder, the faster it rained, the fiercer it blew, the more exhilarated grew her companion.

"I daresay we shall find every hotel full when we get to the other end of the lake," he said; "not a bed to be had anywhere, either for love or money, I feel sure. That always happens to me when I leave home to enjoy myself. But, you see, it would not be travel at all if we got exactly what we get at home. Personally, I delight in this sort of thing," he added, as he shook a quart or two of rain-water from the sleeve of his mackintosh. "It is so good for the spirits!"

Under other circumstances, Sabina and Prue would have been inclined to shed tears of mortification at the thought of crossing Windermere in such weather. As it was, they both caught the Curate's playful mood. He was so kind, so courteous, that Prue forgot the disturbing image of the beautiful Miss Ivory. Sabina also felt girlishly frolicsome.

"And of course, if we can't see Windermere in all its beauty, we must imagine it," Prue said. "Not everybody is lucky enough to see it in the rain."

"Ah, the rain! I never could understand, myself,

why people rail at the rain," the Curate said, his wits seeming to sharpen with every flash of lightning, his spirits to rise with every blinding gust. "Nothing like an umbrella to make people agreeable in conversation! Instead of staring at this, that, and the other, repeating what everybody has said a thousand times before, they say something worth listening to, in order, I suppose, to make up for the drenching."

"You are right there, sir!" said a stander-by, a tall, grey-haired, dreamy, affectionate-looking man. "The umbrella is, to the ordinary mortal, as the tub to Diogenes, the Agora to Socrates, the Areopagus to St. Paul. If the umbrella does not bring out the divine spark in a man, depend on it that man is the dullest-born of mortal clods. How many romances, philosophies, cunning inventions, reforms, are due to the umbrella!"

"I would go even further, and say, How many religions, or rather religious phases, are due to the umbrella!" put in a short, square-built, bright-eyed man, evidently his travelling companion. "When the sun shines, and the butterflies dance about, who thinks of saving his own soul or that of his neighbour? Rain sobers, rain incites to introspection. The umbrella represents the spiritual side of humanity."

"It is as good as a sermon, anyhow," laughed the Curate, still in the highest spirits; "and a Poor Richard into the bargain! I never walk five miles under an umbrella without thinking of the rainy day in matters of pounds, shillings, and pence. I suppose some folks lay by for the rainy day, as it is called. To myself, it has always been as chimerical as trying to stop rain altogether."

The little party of listeners laughed. Then the first stranger spoke. His benevolent face turned to Sabina and Prue with the look of interest that some intelligent, kindly men feel in every daughter of Eve, old or young, beautiful or ugly.

"It is time to hear what the ladies have to say on the subject."

Sabina looked at Prue; Prue looked at Sabina. So, being the more experienced of the two in matters of the heart, Sabina took up the challenge.

"An umbrella—dear me! you ask me to say something about an umbrella," she said, with a charming little blush. "Dear me, gentlemen! really now, you forget one must be young—a young woman, I mean—to give an opinion on such a subject! I always associate an umbrella with first love, Lord Byron, and dreams of bliss never to be realised."

"Bravo!" cried the pair of strangers. "Now the other lady must positively enunciate an opinion."

Prue smiled and hesitated. For a moment she, however, the shyest of shy womankind, was turned into an epigrammatist by the magic of the umbrella.

Somewhat primly she answered:

"An umbrella always reminds me of true friendship—expanding in time of storm, and lying squat when not needed."

"An apt and charming simile, that," rejoined the elder stranger. "I hope, as we have all become so friendly under our umbrellas, we may meet again. 'Twould be pleasant to meet again at Lodore."

"It seems rather odd that we should want to see more water for years to come," the Curate said, shaking another bucketful from his mackintosh. "However, there

is no accounting for tastes; and the more people get of anything the more they want—there is no doubt of that.”

It certainly seemed so in this instance. As the weather worsened, the little steamer became fuller and fuller. At every landing-place, it took up little groups of mackintoshed, umbrella'd, behooded travellers. With smiling faces they came—fastidious maidens, stalwart undergraduates, burly City men, comfortable matrons, grave English parsons, and American tourists. The rain, with its magic wand, seemed to have conjured them forth as the Pied Piper of Hamelin conjured forth the rats. Good-natured, or in grumbling humour, still they came; and, but for the contingents set down, the contingents taken up would have overfreighted the vessel. Some, like the Curate and his companions, were evidently continuing their journey; the greater number were merely making little excursions on the lake, taking one steamer out, another back again, in the rain. Why should they do it? Why should they not? They were out on a holiday. Indoor life at a hotel meant the quintessence of boredom. Better to get drenched to the skin, and have the pleasure of talking about it afterwards, than remain indoors dry as tinder with nothing to talk about at all!

“Oh, yes! I hope, I am sure, we shall all meet again at Lodore!” Sabina said, in the blushing, sentimental way some spinsters never outgrow, when addressing the other sex. To her artless mind this adventure presented the very romance of travel. The heavens frowned, the rain poured down, the glorious landscape was completely blotted out from view; yet she should never forget the journey across Windermere.

The Curate, Prue, and the younger of the two strangers were now pacing the deck.

"Wet or fine, when on board ship there is nothing like pacing the deck," said the Curate. "We are not on board ship exactly, but there is water enough to drown us all; and here we are on a boat, so it amounts to the same thing. Who can keep up his spirits if he sits stock-still for hours at a time? This I call exhilarating."

So backwards and forwards they paced with other travellers in search of exhilaration. They hustled and jostled each other with their dripping umbrellas; the rain spurted and squirted; now one umbrella was blown inside out, now another was blown outside in; the water ran in little rivers along the deck, and fell in pailfuls from the awning—nothing could damp the general ardour. An inhabitant of some drier planet, suddenly transported to the scene, must have supposed rain to constitute the acme of felicity to dwellers on this globe.

"All very well for young folk, that sort of thing," said Sabina's cavalier; "those whom rheumatism has made wise will prefer a dry skin. Well, if the rain never comes to an end, fortunately Windermere does. Maybe, like myself, you are a stranger hereabouts?"

"Quite a stranger," said Sabina. "I am an Eastern counties woman."

"Making a little pleasure-trip with your friends, eh? We—that is to say, myself and my nephew, the Doctor yonder—come from the States, and our errand is partly business and partly pleasure."

Sabina testified the keenest interest in her fellow-traveller's affairs. To be thus taken into confidence by

acquaintances of an hour seemed the very poetry of travel.

“Bound on business or pleasure, who would pass this way without stopping to see Lodore, and hear the waters—

“ ‘ Flapping and rapping, and clapping and slapping,  
And curling and whirling, and purling and twirling ’ ?

Niagara itself couldn't do more. As I was saying, then, the Doctor yonder—I mean my nephew and myself—have come——”

Just then the signal was given of another stoppage. Sabina's interlocutor was pounced upon by his travelling companion.

“Bowness—we sleep here to-night, but lookout for us at Lodore,” said the elder man; whilst the younger, with equal friendliness, waved his hand from the landing-place and shouted:

“Lodore!”



## CHAPTER XI.

### COACHING IT MERRILY TO LODORE.

TRUE enough, two days after, the little party was coaching it merrily to Lodore. The Curate had been unable to resist the temptation of keeping holiday somewhat longer.

“Fortunately,” he said, “as poor Bates’ funeral is to take place at Morecaster, and no one else wants to be buried, baptised, or married, I can stay. If anyone did, I dare say Georgie could do it all as well as myself; but nobody does, so here I am. When once I get away from home—I don’t know how it is—I never want to get back again. I suppose I ought; but I never do. I always look upon people who are ready to do exactly what they ought to do as a superior order of beings.”

It certainly seemed matter for little wonderment that poor Mr. Bacchus, when once out on a holiday, should never want to go home. Was not coaching it merrily to Lodore a thousand times more agreeable to an educated man than the business of getting linen ready for the washerwoman, nursing a fractious baby, shelling peas for dinner, or helping the maid-of-all-work to tidy up after the sweep? Cheerfully and uncomplainingly as the Curate performed these duties, he could but feel glad to exchange them for a little distraction when it came in his way; and distraction that came gratui-

tously as the dews of heaven—therein lay the gist of the matter.

“I am sure you can understand my feelings,” he said to his two companions. “Why I really enjoy myself so much is because I have never to put my hand in my own pockets. If I had to do so, it would be of no use—there is never any money in them; but the feeling of relief is the same. A meal, now, at a hotel, every morsel would almost choke me if I had to pay for it myself—always supposing I could, you know.”

The two ladies understood his feelings quite well. Their enjoyment of every moment was intense as his own, and partly due to the same causes. Delightful as it was to behold Lodore, still more delightful was the fact of beholding it for nothing.

The weather, too, was now glorious; and, however inspiriting a trip may be in the rain, it certainly loses nothing of its charm by the sunshine.

There they were, then, the three friends and their two acquaintances, merrily coaching it to Lodore. Sabina found herself beside the elder stranger; behind sat Prue and the Doctor; whilst Mr. Bacchus occupied a seat by the coachman. Truth to tell, he was dying to handle the reins.

All were in airy spirits, and no wonder. It is not everybody's privilege to see how “the waters come down at Lodore.” None surely had ever journeyed thither under circumstances so romantic as did Sabina and Prue.

Thus at least they thought when fairly on their way to Lodore. The horses trotted briskly; the peep of blue lake between waxen-green foliage was fairylike; the reflection of fleecy-white cloud and azure sky, per-

fect—yet tongues wagged as if there was nothing in sight but a brick wall. So imperative, indeed, is the necessity of speech to mortals that, could they behold the siege of Jerusalem, the storming of the Bastile, or any other moving event in the world's history re-enacted before their very eyes, they would doubtless chatter like magpies all the time. And the men chatted away as fast as the women; no greater fallacy than to suppose redundancy of speech a weakness of the sex!

The Rev. Mr. Bacchus had set out with the firm determination of driving a four-in-hand, not only to Lodore, but to Buttermere. Certainly, as he had put it to the ladies, the open break that does duty for a coach in the Lake country nowadays is hardly to be called a four-in-hand; yet so long as you are in some sort of vehicle, drawn by four animals of some kind, it amounts to precisely the same thing. Why so many nice distinctions? Twice two make four, anyhow; and a trap that carries as many people as a coach is as good as a coach any day.

"Your horses are as quiet as lambs, I see," he began insinuatingly: "a child could drive them."

"She's a Tartar," replied the driver, indicating the left-hand horse nearest him.

The Curate delighted in nothing so much as driving a Tartar.

"I suppose you let a fare take the reins for a bit now and then?" asked Mr. Bacchus.

"Not with a tetchy one like Betsy," said the man, thinking to himself that, if the parson reckoned on the pleasure of showing off Betsy, he was much mistaken.

"I can drive a four-in-hand as easily as I can preach a sermon. Just let me show you," said the Curate.

The driver eyed his companion slyly.

"I don't say you can't, sir; but you see, if anything were to happen—and that Betsy, now, there's no relying whatsoever on her."

But the more difficult of attainment seemed the escapade, the more eager became the Curate to indulge in it. He could hardly have been more frantic to take Betsy in hand had his very existence depended on it. His fellow-travellers were to alight at Lodore; but he determined that, if the man would let him drive, he would go on to Buttermere, at least as far as Betsy would let him. His ambition stopped there.

"Where might Betsy come from?" asked Mr. Bacchus, affecting sudden interest in her native place and genealogy.

"Bless you, sir!" said the man; "these sort of beasts, sir, we take at a pinch without a character—just come from nowhere. T'other, now, on the right hand, Charley, I can tell you anything you want to know about him."

The Curate delightedly led the way to a topical discourse; it was exactly what he wanted. So he talked of Charley's home; and, as there are many places with names very much resembling one another in the North, it was some time before they came to an understanding about it. Mr. Bacchus appeared to have grown quite indifferent to the charms of driving by this time, but was stealthily watching his chance.

They were going lazily uphill. The driver showed increasing interest in the Curate's pocket-map. Yes, that was the name; would the gentleman hold the reins while he looked at it? The thing was done; obstacles that a few minutes before had seemed insurmountable

had vanished: there was the Curate driving a four-in-hand uphill and downhill to Lodore! He sat bolt upright, flourished his whip, manipulated the reins—the happiest man under heaven at that moment.

Away they went like the wind, for he had touched up Betsy; and the lively animal, like many others of her sex, only seemed to want her head. What harm is there in that? Should we not all end our days in a mad-house, unless we were allowed to have our head occasionally?

As to the driver, he kept his eye on his horses and his fare, and said nothing. He was the father of a family. The bread of his wife and children depended on his steadiness; but he loved a joke as well as anybody, and could not for the life of him help indulging in it now. The spectacle of the parson driving was worth any money. As he said afterwards, Mr. Bacchus was the meekest-looking man imaginable. Judging from appearances, one could hardly have supposed him capable of driving a poor feeble-spirited donkey, much less a team of coach-horses headed by a Tartar. But, just as occasion makes the thief, so will opportunity make the exploit. The Curate was resolute on one point—he was not going to stop at Lodore; and so, in a very short space of time, had Betsy. The pair understood each other perfectly.

In the mean time a very interesting conversation was taking place between Sabina and her fellow-traveller.

“As I was saying to you on board the steamer,” began the stranger, “my nephew (the Doctor) and myself are visiting these parts partly on business and partly on pleasure; and bound on business or pleasure, who

would pass this way without seeing Lodore? But when we leave Keswick, the day after to-morrow, we shall have other things to think of. Curiously enough," he added, "our family originally came from these parts."

"How deeply interesting!" Sabina said. "You must feel as if every place ought to be familiar, although, of course, it cannot be so. It seems the same thing as ourselves—our ancestors, I mean; but, in reality, it is quite different."

"I never set foot on English soil till I landed at Liverpool a few days ago," he continued; "and I don't suppose I ever should, but for an odd circumstance that has lately happened. We Americans have been so long severed from the parent stock that, as a rule, we know no more of one another than the Ribston pippin knows of its progenitor, the crab-tree. Pray don't take this comparison amiss! However, my nephew and myself have been sent for by our relations—that is the proper way to put it. Pleasant, that—to be sent for across the Atlantic by one's relations! It so seldom happens!"

Sabina smiled acquiescingly. Yes: that sentiment both she and Prue could echo from the very bottom of their hearts. Nothing could be pleasanter than the summons to Briardale in their own case.

"Pleasant, too, the expectations thereby called forth," resumed the stranger. "We no more know why we are wanted than the man in the moon. How can we help conjuring up all kinds of possibilities! The fact is—the fact is——"

Just then the behaviour of Betsy under the Curate's conduct, and the sudden alarm thereby created, stopped the conversation.

Mr. Bacchus had not the slightest intention of letting the mare run away, nor had she any such intention to begin with. Having once got her head, she wanted only to go a little farther and a little faster than usual. Why that automatic halt at precisely the same spot, day after day? And that was all Mr. Bacchus desired—just a pretence at running away, an agreeable flutter among the passengers, a little harmless screaming among the ladies, then a sudden pull-up amid a general buzz of relief.

So instead of slackening speed, or paying any attention to the importunities of the driver, he whipped up his team, Betsy taking the lead; the three soberer horses would fain have behaved after everyday fashion. On they went, in spite of themselves, at a flying pace. Lodore was now in sight; but the nearer they got, the faster they galloped. The ostlers hanging about the hotel by the wayside sprang forward to seize the bridle; away tugged the animals, no more heeding them than so many gate-posts. Out rushed master and mistress, guests, head-waiters and under-waiters, to see what was the matter. Those in authority uttered futile orders at the top of their voices, the ladies screamed, the youngsters hallooed and waved their caps, the dogs barked, whilst on the top of the coach reigned a greater commotion still.

Some of the passengers were disconcerted at one thing, some at another: the more timid thought that the horses were running away, and that their very lives were in jeopardy; several being bound to London that evening were alarmed at the notion of being carried, Heaven knew whither, to the forfeiture of their return-tickets and the general upsetting of their plans; others

were of opinion that the Lodore coach, so called, was altogether an imposture, and that they should be cheated into paying double fare for not being set down at the proper place. All were startled, outraged, indignant.

Those of the ladies able to reach the driver with their parasols belaboured him soundly, crying:

“Lodore! Set us down at Lodore! Lodore—do you hear?”

The men drummed their walking-sticks on the coach’s sides, echoing in stentorian tones:

“Lodore! I say, we get down at Lodore!”

What, indeed, with the rattling of wheels, the clamour of voices, the disturbance alike among passengers and by-standers, the barking of the sympathetic dogs—the celebrated falls themselves, when the water was at its fullest, could hardly have made more noise.

But just as the general uproar had reached its acme, and it seemed as if the Curate and his four-in-hand were hurrying away as fast as they could to perdition, and everybody expected to see everybody else in some dire strait, Mr. Bacchus adroitly manœuvred the reins; he gently checked Betsy’s ardour, slackened the speed of the rest, and, without more ado, brought his heavily-laden vehicle to a standstill.

“That comes of letting a parson get hold of the reins!” said a looker-on solemnly, as if half a dozen passengers had got a broken limb.



## CHAPTER XII.

### ECSTASIES AND MISGIVINGS.

**T**HERE they were, then, in sight of Lodore at last; and true enough, a circumstance less satisfactory, the famous waters behaved just as the poet had taught them to expect:

“ Eddying and whisking,  
Spouting and frisking,  
Twining and twisting, . . .  
Smiting and fighting—  
A sight to delight in.”

And there gazed the four strangers who had journeyed so far to see. They were all in a transport of admiration. As the Transatlantic traveller observed, Niagara itself could not really do more.

It must be admitted that a rainy season had greatly embellished Lodore. The fancy cannot conceive a more bewildering and yet refreshing spectacle, music of more imposing kind. A waterfall that should be noiseless were surely shorn of half of its majesty, perhaps, indeed, of its grandest feature: the awful volume of sound so rhythmic, so improvised! What an ecstasy for a blind man to be placed within earshot of this thunderous, trumpet-voiced Lodore! The unseen part of it he could conjure up. The jet-black rock piled

pyramidally, as it appears, half-way towards heaven; the masses of water, silvery bright; the rainbow that comes and goes, dropping jewelled rays; the dazzling green foliage round about—all this, had his eye once beheld earth's beauteous face, he could behold with the inner eye blindness cannot take away.

The Curate, having seen Lodore many times before, had taken the coach to the next stage. He always went as far as he could, he said. He never contented himself with seeing one thing if he could see two, or with two if he could see three, when out on his travels; only fools did that, he said.

Sabina and Prue were therefore left with their new acquaintance. In happy unconcern, not in the least aware of the revelation in store for them, the pair prattled away to their genial cavaliers. The much-travelled are as the possessors of an ample library. Those who have seen but one or two choice spots or marvellous scenes in the course of their existence are as the owners of half a dozen books only; each one, however, they know by heart. Thus it was with these simple, Nature-loving women. They were, in reality, as much enriched as if they had journeyed round the world. So much more worth having is one deep and rememberable impression than a thousand of fleeting kind.

The two men threw themselves on the turf in front of the waterfall; Sabina and Prue sat on a mossy stone near them, the latter holding Southey's Poems in her hand. She wanted to read "How the Waters Come Down at Lodore," in the spot where they really did come down, just to see if the poet had exaggerated, she said. But no: after gazing and listening, and gazing

and listening again, she must say he had not exaggerated a bit. If ever waters came down—

“Thumping and plumping, and bumping and jumping,”

they were the waters of Lodore.

“I wonder what the waters tell *us*, nephew,” said the elder stranger, smiling significantly at his companion. “Do they thunder forth salutes of victory, *salves* of triumph? or is the deafening chorus a mere mockery of our hopes and expectations—mischievous watersprites, kobolds, elves, and brownies, bidding us pocket our ill-luck and begone?”

Sabina, recalling the speaker's interrupted confidence on the coach, now gently nipped Prue's arm. Something told her all was not right. Prue, wholly unsuspecting of what was coming, turned a ready ear.

The Doctor was amusing himself with pebbles, aimed now at this eddying, seething mass of waters, now at that. Thus interrogated, he smiled curiously as he made reply:

“No, sir: I am not going to be balked of Fortune's favours this time, if you are. The heartless jade has flirted with us both cruelly enough until now. It is high time for her to change her tune; and, as I listen to these waters, ‘*Fortune, Fortune,*’ is the burden of their song.”

“A very pleasant burden, too,” Prue replied, all unconscious of the speaker's meaning. She imputed Sabina's sudden pensiveness to recollections of the lost Edwin.

“Have it all your own way,” continued the first speaker. “Money, were we to get millions, won't make me twenty years younger, nor you twenty times wiser.

But, if we come into a fortune, we will thank Heaven that we are thus enabled to better our neighbours; and, if we don't, we must leave the task to others. How would you feel, now," he added, looking from Sabina to Prue—"how would you two ladies feel if you were in this position—poor as church mice to-day, expecting to find yourselves walking money-bags to-morrow?"

Prue was in such an ecstasy with Lodore that she was no nearer the disagreeable truth than before. Nothing could be farther from her mind than rivalries and competitors just then. The unaccustomed scene, the novel circumstance in which she found herself, intoxicated like wine. As she listened to the rushing waters, "Fortune, Fortune!" also seemed the burden of their song in her own ears. Sabina certainly felt a little nervous. She had set out for Lodore in a girlish flutter of expectation and enjoyment, and now wise words of the lost Edwin were coming into her mind.

"Bina," he had once said, as she told Prue afterwards—"Bina, never expect two turkeys at Christmas. If somebody sends you one, make the most of that." How could she expect a second turkey now? Lodore was one; she must make the most of that, not believing in the other—the something to their advantage.

As Prue did not reply to the stranger's query, Sabina answered for her.

"How should we feel?" she said, tittering and hesitating. "Strangely enough—the oddest thing in the world it is, to be sure—that is just how we do feel. That is the very position we are in ourselves."

The strangers smiled and looked politely, even amiably interested, that was all. They also were far from suspecting the true state of affairs.

“As I remember my poor dear Edwin saying—the gentleman I was to have married, I mean; we had lost a cow, and the very next day a haystack caught fire—‘Bina,’ he said, ‘events never happen singly—mark that!’ Who could have supposed, who could have dreamed, that, when we came to Lodore in quest of something to our advantage, we should meet with you two gentlemen on the very same errand!”

Prue saw it all now. Sabina’s forced gaiety did not undeceive her. These ingratiating, agreeable strangers were claimants also—rivals, and dangerous rivals, in the field. The elder might be sixty; his companion was yet in his prime, and in all probability the father of blooming children—the very person, indeed, wanted. Her heart sank within her at the thought, and she saw that it was with no little difficulty Sabina maintained self-composure; she was sniffing at her smelling-bottle, pretending to brush away a fly from her eye, flushing and fidgeting. As for poor Prue, she bent her head low over Southey’s volume, and dropped a tear of mortification on the open page.

The pair of strangers seemed, for their part, little disconcerted by the revelations. Why should they, indeed? Were not their chances of success far greater?

“Phew!” cried the elder, with extreme friendliness and good-nature. “So you are bound to Hopedale, too? Well, the more the merrier; and we are at least in good company.”

Neither did the Doctor appear one whit cast down at the sudden turn given to affairs.

“Heigh-ho!” he cried. “So, uncle, we shall have to share the cake with the ladies! So much the better, I say. Who would sit in a corner, like little Jack

Horner, eating his Christmas pie? You must know," he said, turning explanatorily to the friends, "my uncle and myself don't care a jackstraw for money in itself. We don't want to be rich in order to butter our bread an inch thick, eat strawberries that cost half a crown apiece, and doze by the fire whilst half-naked wretches sweep away the snow."

"We want money for the sake of making others better and happier," put in the uncle.

Prue, so suddenly plunged from ecstatic contemplation into melancholy, could not easily recover her spirits. Attention, however, was immediately arrested by the words of the last speaker. When she heard of people being made better and happier, she smiled pensive approval, looking at the same time somewhat puzzled. The stranger had a benevolent but altogether unclerical appearance. It never occurred to her that anybody but a clergyman deliberately set himself the task of making people better and happier. Her notions of goodness and happiness were those preached from every pulpit in the kingdom o' Sundays. But travel was already teaching her many things; amongst others, that there was more 'twixt heaven and earth than she dreamed of in her philosophy.

The younger man took up the theme.

"Why use such miserably hackneyed words? Better and happier, forsooth! Shall we set a rickety world on its legs by trying the nostrums that have failed for six thousand years? No, ladies; quacks and mountebanks we may seem to most, moon-struck maniacs to many, brands fit for the burning, heretics incarnate, to some. But so has it fared with all innovators from the beginning; the first man to build a church, the first to

pull one down—both have passed for blasphemers in the eyes of the self-righteous.”

Prue tried her best not to look shocked.

Sabina listened with extreme interest. “Always keep your mind open to new ideas,” Edwin had once said. It was on the occasion of purchasing a new kind of button, with double hanks; if one snapped, the other kept the button on. Yes, Edwin could reap wisdom from the most trivial circumstance! What he would have developed into, had he lived, was beyond her imagination to conceive. Being of a less devotional and theologic turn, too, than Prue, she could more easily enter into the spirit of lay doctrines, and better relish the discourse that had no savour of the pulpit about it. Prue could not honestly believe in anything unconnected with the Church; that is to say, her own Church. The Church was to her as the vast seashore to the crab walking backwards.

“Let us first explain who we are,” resumed the older man. “My name, then, is Derrober, a corruption of the original family name of De Robert. My nephew, yonder, is Dr. Franklin Derrober; and we both—that is to say, our ancestors half a dozen generations back—migrated from these parts to the States. But the gist of the matter is this: we were just the people in want of a fortune, and just the people wanted for a fortune. This is a singular fact in itself, and it does not stand alone. Why we want a fortune! There is the rub!”

The Doctor smiled.

“Reformers are always as full of themselves as an egg is full of meat. You see, ladies, much as we enjoy your society and this scene, that old gentleman yonder, my respected uncle, can do nothing but talk of our

plans. Ah! and once you trot him out, he would go on at a brisk canter till Doomsday."

"Themselves—ourselves!" broke in Mr. Derrober indignantly. "What are ourselves but a portion of humanity; and what is humanity but a mass of hoping, erring, for the most part misguided, mortals? The reproach is not theirs who speak: it is theirs who keep silent."

Sabina and Prue began to feel really interested. After all, if the coveted fortune fell into the hands of these good men—missionaries, evangelists, at any rate, philanthropists—as they were, what right had they to complain?

"Hark ye, ladies!" added Mr. Derrober; "before I go a step farther, let me put a question to you. Did you ever read a book called 'Brook Farm'?"

No: they certainly had read no such book. Many a story about a farm was familiar to them; none they knew called by that special name.

"Then," replied the other, "permit me to say you have read nothing. 'Brook Farm'—well, well—'Brook Farm' is another name for a phalanstery; maybe you have never heard of a phalanstery either?"

No: that word was quite new to them, both said.

"Now, nephew, just tell the ladies what a phalanstery is. You turn off descriptions so much quicker than I do."

Thus appealed to, Dr. Derrober threw a final pebble into a vortex of creamy waters, and replied:

"A phalanstery? well, a phalanstery is exactly what the world and society are not. Put an ordinary woman into a phalanstery, and she is straightway transformed into a nineteenth-century muse, adoring and adored——"



"Oh, dear!" cried Sabina. "What a nice place a phalanstery must be!"

Prue also smiled approvingly.

"Put an ordinary man into a phalanstery, and in a short space of time he will become a decent copy of Plato or Franklin. In fact, the difference between life inside our phalanstery and outside is just the difference between the rose and the thorn, the pearl and its encumbering oyster, the sweet wine and the bitter aloes."

"Only think of what your sex would obtain in our model society!" said Mr. Derrober. "A goodly fellowship of kindred souls, work of sublime, elevating kind, recreation befitting creatures endowed with souls; and of love, neither stint nor spare."

Sabina and Prue slightly blushed, beginning to wonder if the conversation of these courteous, well-bred gentlemen did not now verge on impropriety.

The speaker looked about as light-minded as a bishop on ordination day, his companion seemed no whit more disposed to make unseemly jests. Yet this discourse was passing strange; the like of it they had never heard before.

"Could any rational being hesitate, were such a choice placed before him?" continued Mr. Derrober. "On the one hand, an ignominious elbowing in the crowd for bare bread—a miserably circumscribed existence at best—everything on the most niggardly, pinchbeck scale; for habitation, mere breathing-space; for flower-garden, a square yard full of smoke-begrimed flowers; for society, the gossiping people of a country town."

"And morning and night," put in the Doctor, "the same ignoble query: Have we, ye beneficent gods,

who preside over pounds, shillings, and pence—have we to-day spent a groat too much?"

Sabina and Prue laughed with a little bitterness. The allegory came home. Yes, they understood it all—the pinchbeck, the cheese-parings, the groat too much. Such a life was theirs, and such a life was that of thousands.

"On the other hand," resumed Mr. Derrober—"in our phalanstery, I mean—circumstances worthy of beings born to walk upright and stare heaven-sent Destiny in the face; a palatial home, with beauty and nobleness to meet the eye at every turn; fine music; grand works of art; parks and parterres, such as now only millionaires enjoy; elevating conversation; and, to crown all, duties that shall fit us for a life so rare, so nearly approaching perfection."

"It sounds very pleasant, if one could only manage to get into it—into the phalanstery, I mean," Sabina said innocently. "There must be always far too many applications."

"And what about expense?" asked Prue, always alive to the economic aspect of the question. "How could people with small, very small, incomes expect to be received into such an establishment?"

"Ah!" laughed the satirical Doctor: "there you have hit the right nail on the head. Why as yet does our phalanstery exist only in imagination? Because there is no true spirit of brotherhood amongst us. When society is properly constituted, there will no longer be any very rich or very poor; but one golden spoon to feed the million-mouthed humanity, one purple cloak to cover the nakedness of all."

"And in hopes of getting an ingot towards the golden

spoon, a square inch of purple cloth, we are on our way to Hopedale," added Derrober the elder. "Whether we shall get it is another question. So now, ladies, you realise the situation, as far as nephew and self are concerned."

Then Sabina and Prue told them their simple story. They spoke of their country life; the eking out existence in a tiny home; the hopes called forth by Mrs. De Robert's advertisement in the newspapers, and so on. They became the best of comrades, and it was finally decided that the return to Briardale should be made together.

"And to think!" said Sabina to Prue, when they were alone; "twenty, thirty-five years ago, had my Edwin lived, our honeymoon would have been spent at Lodore; and those waters have gone on 'dinning and spinning, and dropping and hopping,' ever since!"

## CHAPTER XIII.

### HOW MR. BACCHUS FULFILS HIS ERRAND.

**I**F the Rev. Mr. Bacchus had felt a proud and happy man when conducting the Lodore coach, he felt positive self-inflation when accompanying his new-claimants home. He had all along coveted a share in that strange business intrusted to the Vicar of Hopedale—Mrs. De Robert's "next of kin," and the something they were to hear of to their advantage.

The pleasing responsibilities thereby incurred, the frequent intercourse thus brought about with the beautiful Miss Ivory, excited in the Curate's breast a feeling of mild envy. In spite of many excellent qualities of head and heart, Mrs. De Robert was not attractive to the other sex; for the sake of Eugenia, her eccentricities and acerbities were endured by her two faithful henchmen. In fact, a visit to Hopedale was the gulping down of a pill embedded in jam; the submitting, schoolboy-like, to have a tooth drawn for the "bribe" of a shilling.

Mrs. De Robert meant no harm, and never did any harm to anybody; but she stormed and scolded and vituperated till she frightened folks half out of their wits. Mr. Bacchus had been enchanted to have the two ladies under his roof; that was something, a decided step in the right direction. The arrival of the Derrobers and their installation at Briardale was much more to the purpose.

Brimful of importance, Mr. Bacchus set out for Hopedale. There was one charm in the Curate's character—no matter what happened, nothing could damp his ardour. Addicted as he was to self-depreciation, perhaps in small matters the most conscience-stricken man alive, if he felt enthusiasm about anything, he went on feeling it, let others say or do what they would to discourage him.

The Vicar received the Curate with the utmost affability, as well he might. Everything about Mr. Meridian was in apple-pie order. His women-servants would have gained prizes, supposing prizes were awarded to model cooks, house and parlour maids. Appearance, age, dress, all was correctness itself. As to the house, not a fly, much less a spider, could find lodgment there, so thoroughly was it broomed and besomed from attic to cellar.

Time was kept at the Vicarage accurately as at Greenwich Observatory. No dish was ever known to have been brought to table under false pretences.

"You would never guess what happened to us at Lodore," burst forth the Curate. "Only think of falling in with a host of Mrs. De Robert's next of kin! And Hopedale, above all places in the world, to be overrun with Socialists, Free-lovers, and Mormons! It makes me feel out of date to think of it."

Mr. Meridian smiled a little contemptuously. He thought that in more senses than one the Curate was out of date. Inwardly uneasy, but without any betrayal of self-composure, he replied:

"If I understand you right, you have fallen in with a somewhat numerous party of these good people? Not all preachers of Socialist doctrine, I presume?"

"Numbers! did I speak of numbers?" asked the Curate, looking aghast. "I hope not. I never make use of numbers unless I can help it. They are such stumbling-blocks, such snares, even to the wary."

"You certainly conveyed the impression of a numerous company," Mr. Meridian said. "If you intend to enlighten Mrs. De Robert on the subject, it were just as well to be exact. She will feel sufficiently alarmed at the prospect of one such claimant as you describe, to say nothing of a score."

"No! did I speak of a score? I surely did not speak of a score?" asked the Curate; "although figures always strike me as purely relative. In a case like the present, for instance—that of people got together in search of something to their advantage, I mean—one is a very large, a most alarming addition, in the eyes of the rest; while two is an enormous addition, and three——"

"The chain of reasoning is somewhat attenuated, but I understand your meaning," the Vicar replied. "I take it for granted, then, that Hopedale being overrun with Socialists is a mere figure of speech, and perhaps one holder of these doctrines has appeared in the field?"

"Oh dear, no! no such thing!" replied the Curate. "What is one—by comparison with two, I mean? The difference is simply tremendous—a gulf without a bottom!"

"Then I presume you speak of two?"

"Just that! You have hit the mark to a nicety," the Curate made reply, feeling that he had triumphantly emerged from a metaphysical labyrinth. "We fell in with two, then—two gentlemen—always supposing them to be gentlemen—from the States, who are Socialists,

or Mormons, or something of the kind. It does not really matter what men are when they are anything—anything out of the ordinary way, I mean.”

“And their present abode?”

“Well, they abide nowhere. That is to say, they slept last night at Briardale, but intend to roam about the country till they hear from you—till they are wanted.”

“Pray keep them up to that intention,” the Vicar replied, greatly relieved. “They certainly are not wanted just now. And, my dear Bacchus, have you a spare half-hour? If so, do oblige me by calling on Mrs. De Robert. I am overwhelmed with business at this moment.”

“I shall be delighted to oblige you,” the Curate said, evidently obliging himself still more by accepting the task. “Mrs. De Robert always snaps my head off; yet, as I find it on my shoulders when required, I don’t mind in the least—why should I?”

Mr. Meridian understood well enough why the other did not mind, and already had half regretted having charged him with such an errand. Yet, could anything be more absurd than to regard the Curate in the light of a rival? No; much better stay at home, and let him for once bear the brunt of Mrs. De Robert’s thunder and lightning. He had experienced enough of her temper to last for some time to come. Still, he no sooner saw Mr. Bacchus setting off so jauntily for the Manor than he straightway wished he had gone himself. Why embroil another unnecessarily in this business—above all the Curate? Do what he would, the Curate could not state a case clearly, were it the mere boiling of an egg. Thus the Vicar put the matter to himself.

However, he was off; and there was no more stopping him now than stopping a schoolboy on a half-holiday. Fast as his long legs could carry him, swinging his cane gaily as he went, Mr. Bacchus was out of sight before the Vicar could formulate his regret.

Eugenia met her visitor at the garden-gate with a beaming face. She had not a particle of coquetry in her composition; but she could not help being kind to Mr. Bacchus. He was often so much more agreeable to her than the Vicar, which was not perhaps saying much, yet was certainly saying something.

"I hope you have met with adventures on your journey?" were her first words.

"More than I can count on my fingers," was the eager reply; the Curate exulting in the thought of the revelation to come.

"How delightful!" cried the young lady; "and so encouraging! You must know that it is all settled, then: in two months' time, come what may, Mrs. De Robert and myself set forth, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in search of the marvellous."

"Oh dear!" cried the Curate, his gaiety gone in a moment; "I hope not."

"You hope not?" cried Eugenia. "If you have the slightest regard for us both, not to speak of friendship, you must hope what we hope; otherwise, you put yourself on the precise footing of an enemy."

"Always driving me into a corner!" said Mr. Bacchus. "Well, it is better to be driven into a corner than driven nowhere—by you, I mean."

Eugenia could not resist a smile at the Curate's perversity.

"Why this perpetual harping upon two words—'you'



and 'me'?" she said. "'You' and 'me'! I wish they were banished from the dictionary. But now tell me your adventures in proper order, and the rest of my news you shall have afterwards."

"There you have me again!" said the poor Curate. "I never can tell things except as they come into my head; and, generally speaking, what ought to come last comes first, and what ought to come first is left out altogether. However, one adventure I must tell you. All the neighbourhood is talking about it. You will see my name in the papers. I quite expect a reproof from the Bishop."

"What rash exploit are you the hero of?" laughingly asked Miss Ivory. "My curiosity is greatly excited."

"The Bishop can't do less, you see; and I couldn't do less. We must all act when the fit is on us, regardless of consequences. I am sure the fit is on *me* seldom enough. Well, I undertook to drive the Lodore coach, and overturned it—not overturned it exactly, but everybody thought I had done so, which amounts to the same thing. Out came the entire population—I mean, all the people in the hotel—frantic with terror. The hallooing of the men, the screams of the women—you can't conceive the noise they made. Lodore, roaring behind, was the buzzing of a fly to it. On we went, like Jehu, like Phaeton—the fellow who overturned the sun, you know—like John Gilpin; and there was no stopping us—so there seemed, at least; but I had the horses well in hand all the time. And then, when we had gone like the wind for miles—I won't swear it was miles, but when we seemed to have gone miles—that is what I mean—when the by-standers thought all our necks were broken, and the passengers had fright-

ened themselves into thinking the same thing—then in a trice—you never saw a neater job in your life—lo and behold, there we were!”

“And where was the ‘wete’?” asked Eugenia, highly amused.

“Why, at Lodore! That was the joke of it! The horses hadn’t run away; the coach had never been overturned at all; everybody had a whole skin, as before.”

“Then you won’t get a reproof from the Bishop—that is one comfort,” Eugenia said, slightly disappointed. “And now for adventure number two.”

“Number two—let me see, which is number two? I have so much to tell you, I don’t know where to begin. Well, we were all drowned the next morning in Derwent Water. You have surely heard of that?”

“You must all have as many lives as a cat! smiled Miss Ivory. “Necks broken one day, drowned the next, and on the third I suppose you tumbled headlong into a chasm on Helvellyn, where you are now hopelessly immured?”

“Ah! Helvellyn. If I once begin to tell you what adventures befell us on Helvellyn, I shall not leave off till midnight,” replied Mr. Bacchus. “Helvellyn is the place for adventures! We began there by being robbed and murdered—well, not murdered exactly, and fortunately not robbed, as we took the precaution of leaving our money behind us; but some highwaymen, armed from head to foot, waylaid us in a lonely spot, and, had I not shown fight, we should have come off badly.”

“Highwaymen on Helvellyn!” exclaimed Eugenia.

“Well, what are tramps with club-sticks but highwaymen armed from head to foot? The same thing in

other words. I brandished my stick, and the ladies gave them sixpence apiece; and so we continued our journey."

"Ah!" sighed Eugenia, "how I long for the next two months to pass, as I listen to you—for my own turn to come! But it is as I say: Mrs. De Robert and myself do really set forth on the first of October, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in search of adventure."

Again the Curate looked the most crestfallen man under the sun.

"I know the sort of adventure you are sure to meet with," he said, in a melancholy, almost morose voice.

Eugenia feigned not to understand the insinuation.

"It is not yet quite settled where we go," she said, in the same buoyant, anticipatory voice; "but we go somewhere."

"And do you never intend to return to Hopedale?" asked the Curate, still looking desperately low-spirited.

"Since one cannot get even to Lodore without being killed three or four times over, it does not seem very probable that we shall ever get back safe and sound from the other end of the world," was the young lady's reply.

"No, you cannot be really serious! The other end of the world! There is plenty to see without going half that distance," rejoined the disconsolate Mr. Bacchus.

"By the way," said Eugenia, anxious to give a new turn to the conversation, "you showed me your roses the other day. Now come and see mine."

For half an hour the pair lingered among the roses—Eugenia the fairest there. Small matter for wonder that the Curate was loath to go. Not that she uttered a syllable the most hopeful adorer could construe

into encouragement. She tripped him up in his metaphors, laughed him out of his sentimentalities—in fact, administered as wholesome a tonic as ever lover quaffed from the hands of his mistress.

But he enjoyed the privilege of looking at her, listening to her all the while; intoxication of her presence made him unmindful of the fleeting moments. On a sudden, the sight of a glowworm recalled the lateness of the hour. He said adieu hastily, and hurried off.

Nor did he remember, till inside his own door, that he had never fulfilled his errand after all. Miss Ivory and her roses had entirely put the Socialists, Mormons, and Freelovers out of his head. What on earth would Mr. Meridian think of him now?

## CHAPTER XIV.

### MACHINATIONS.

“HOITY-TOITY, toity-tum!” cried Mrs. De Robert a day or two afterwards. “Here is a letter of invitation from the Vicar. He is mighty amiable all of a sudden! Well, I’m not going, if you are, Ivey. Much I’m wanted, I know!”

Miss Ivory took the proffered note and read it aloud:

“‘HÔPEDALE VICARAGE,

“‘July 20, 1875.

“‘DEAR MRS. DE ROBERT—

“‘Will you and Miss Ivory give me the pleasure of your company to an *al fresco* tea this day week? A party of friends touring in these parts will be with me, also a few neighbours. As the vicarage gardens are somewhat small, I propose to do vicarious hospitality in the grounds of Marsden Park, placed at my disposition during Sir Charles’s absence. The hour of meeting, 4 o’clock; the place, the terrace overlooking the park.

“‘Trusting that you will both confer upon me the favor of your company, I remain, with kind regards to Miss Ivory and yourself,

“‘Yours very truly,

“‘ALGAR MERIDIAN.’

“The very opportunity we want for wearing our new summer gowns!” exclaimed Eugenia approvingly.

"Is that a good reason for being put out of one's way, and bored into the bargain?" asked Mrs. De Robert.

"It is better than no reason, anyhow," was the reply. "Do go, to please me, Roberta; besides, we are really bound to accept this invitation. Mr. Meridian evidently wishes to *fete* us before we take our final departure from Hopedale."

Mrs. De Robert smiled significantly.

"Yes, I see through it all. The Vicar is over head and ears in love with you, Jenny. He will leave no stone unturned in order to gain his point."

Eugenia smiled significantly also. The note suggested other motives to her own mind; without letting the elder lady suspect her thoughts, she returned to the immediate question at issue.

"You will let me accept the invitation for both of us, anyhow?"

"Oh, accept, by all means! Never refuse an invitation, were it from his Satanic Majesty himself. Whether I go is wholly another matter."

"Always supposing that you do go, you will wear your new plum-coloured silk?" asked Eugenia.

"What does it matter what I wear? An old woman like myself may go the veriest scarecrow in the world, and none are a jot the wiser."

"We don't dress becomingly for the sake of making people wiser," replied Eugenia, "nor better, that I know of; yet a well-dressed woman always seems to me a walking sermon."

"There is something in that, Ivey. How many women have gone to perdition, body and soul, through wearing draggletail petticoats!"

"Then we will both dress as beautifully for Mr. Meridian's party as if our very salvation depended on it," said Miss Ivory; and she sat down to write the most cordial note imaginable to the Vicar.

Nothing more was said at the time; when, however, Eugenia met the Vicar in her walks, he saw that she had unravelled his little plot. They stood smiling at each other without a word.

"So," she said at last, "you invite us to a garden-party under false pretences? Mrs. De Robert is to be surreptitiously presented to her next of kin?"

"Why are you so deep? Can you never be satisfied with seeing no farther than your neighbours?" said Mr. Meridian. "However, as you have exercised your ingenuity at my expense, you have saved me the trouble of explanations. Could I act otherwise? Here are these good people coming as fast as swallows in May, and Mrs. De Robert won't so much as see them. It places me in an awkward, a ludicrous, position."

"Do tell me who have come, and all about them," Eugenia said, keenly inquisitive.

The Vicar laughed sarcastically.

"I sent Bacchus two days ago to enlighten you both on the subject, and, as usual, he forgot his errand. Sir Isaac Newton himself could not have done me a better turn; Mrs. De Robert now knows nothing of the party of friends touring in the Lake district, of whom I wrote."

"Are they old or young, dull or amusing?" asked Eugenia.

"Let me see! I think we have a little of everything. There is—but you had better wait and judge for yourself," replied the Vicar provokingly. "Only do get

Mrs. De Robert to come. She may find that these much-dreaded claimants are as harmless as possible—sheep in wolves' clothing, jackasses dressed up in lions' skins."

He eyed his companion narrowly and added:

"Are you quite sure of one thing? Will Mrs. De Robert part with her property, after all? What if she changes her mind? A tragic *finale* to a sorry farce, that!"

"No," answered Eugenia, with great decision. "She will be as good as her word, never fear. She is carrying out her late husband's wishes—in her eyes, a sacred trust."

"I sincerely hope that you will prove a true prophet. I confess, at times, I feel misgivings. The affair, moreover, should not be allowed to drag on indefinitely. A date should be fixed for the transfer of the property by a distribution, sortition, or otherwise."

"I have proposed a plan, and Mrs. De Robert makes no objection," replied Miss Ivory. "A selection of candidates shall be made. Two or three of those possessing the best claims shall be retained, the others dismissed; then the property shall be equitably divided and drawn lots for. It would be as exciting as the casket scene in the 'Merchant of Venice.'"

"If *Portia's* portrait occupied the casket," observed the Vicar drily. "But what if all put forth equal claims, and the names of the applicants are Legion?"

"In that case I shall try to persuade Mrs. De Robert to give everybody something," Eugenia said. "Anything is better than nothing."

"Even 'a gross of green spectacles in shagreen cases'; at least, so said the immortal Dr. Primrose. Twenty



thousand pounds carefully expended will go a good way, certainly, in the purchase of green spectacles!"

The conversation thus amicably terminated was not renewed till the eventful day of the party. Mr. Meridian had his own reasons for not calling at the Manor House in the interval. He wished to avoid Mrs. De Robert's close fire of interrogation; he was also busy in making preparations. When the Vicar undertook an affair, he prided himself upon doing it well; and he certainly merited such self-approval. No pains were now spared to make his entertainment as brilliant as possible. He knew that Miss Ivory would be magnificent upon the occasion, and he determined to be magnificent also. Thus, although a mansion and superb pleasure-grounds were placed at his disposal, he must aggrandise and embellish to the utmost. Marquees of latest design were ordered from Lancaster, Italian confectioners engaged for the proper management of ices and creams, musicians to untice to improvised dance, with exotics and fruit in regal abundance.

The garden-party was quite as much of a compliment to Miss Ivory as a fraud practised upon Mrs. De Robert. There was more than one affair Mr. Meridian did not wish to drag on indefinitely. If, as seemed possible and even probable, the two ladies would quit Hopedale in the autumn, he must do the best he could for himself before their departure; in other words, he must secure an opportunity of pressing his suit. The garden-party might help to further his wishes.

Meantime, the Derrobbers, uncle and nephew, were let into the secret, and were keeping themselves in the background. They visited, one after another, the sweet little watering-places studded about Morecambe Bay.

These miniature oases of verdure and centres of life between the silent fells and placid inland sea had a strange fascination for the Transatlantic travellers. Such sleepy townlets as Grange and Arnside seemed toy-like to them, accustomed as they were to bigness and bustle everywhere. Pleasant, too, the feeling of isolation from the crowd of travelling folk.

These little dales, nestled at the feet of the widely parted Cumberland and Westmoreland hills, seemed to have been left out of the tourist's itinerary and map altogether. The seaboard villages were frequented by a handful of local holiday-makers only; while inland the solitude was unbroken, alike on breezy height and parklike pastures.

The sight of such glorious pastures might lead the uninitiated to take England for a pastoral country, a land in which shepherds and milkmaids are not mythical personages. The eagle soaring overhead—a sight to be thankful for—reminds us that the war of extermination, waged against Nature's fiercest and grandest children, has not been entirely successful.

Pleasant to turn from the doomed eagle, flashing through the blue heavens like a meteor, to the homlier birds encouraged to live. So numerous are they, so fearless in the presence of man, that indeed they may be thus described. Harken to the peewit's humanlike cry; watch the husbandman turning up the fallow, and you will perceive the bird keeping close to him, as if from feelings of protection and good-fellowship.

What pleased the travellers no less was the general look of cultivation, even finish, in waste places. Not a lonely crag without its green tapestry; no sound of axe, much less of steam felling-machine, in the woods;

no half-constructed shanty amid fields ploughed but yesterday; no signs either of growth or demolition—Eden-like repose brooding over all.

Whilst these two claimants thus obligingly hid themselves from view, equally inconspicuous were any others who might have come forward. No rumour of them was permitted to reach Mrs. De Robert's ears; and, fortunately, the Vicar's garden-party, and the extraordinarily handsome preparations he was making for it, diverted the general attention.

The neighbours gossiped now, not of the next of kin, and the something they were to hear of to their advantage, but of Mr. Meridian's Italian iceman and his subordinates, Mr. Meridian's orchestra, Mr. Meridian's marquees. It was the Vicar's this, that, and the other, from morning till night.

As to Sabina and Prue, his graciously worded invitation had fairly turned their heads. No such sumptuous entertainment had as yet fallen to their share. The affair seemed so important that even the Curate's advice was asked upon certain points.

"You see," Prue said, with a girlish blush of hesitating appeal, "after all you have told us about Mrs. De Robert, we naturally feel a little nervous. If we are fine, she will think we don't want her money; and, if we are dowdies, she may turn from us with repulsion."

"And it is still more difficult to know how to behave under such circumstances," Sabina said. "If we are humble, we shall be set down as toadies, and, if we hold up our heads, may be abused as upstarts. I wish from the bottom of my heart the awful day were well over."

"Don't say that," put in Prue. "People should

always be grand when they can. Let us be grand for once."

Mr. Bacchus now felt called upon to deliver an opinion.

"Dress!" he said. "Dear me! I am the last person in the world to be consulted as an authority upon dress. If I am never made a bishop, it will be because I neglect my personal appearance. It is always the best-dressed men who get to be canons, deans, and so forth. And women, too: the women who get on in the world are those who think of nothing, morning, noon, and night, but how they look. I am sure of that, little else as I know of the matter."

The listeners smiled. They could not go into details, but might, nevertheless, learn much from their oracle.

"I suppose," put in Prue, the coquette of the two, "upon these occasions ladies wear bright colours."

"That's it," said Mr. Bacchus—"white dresses, pink sashes, straw hats with daisies; the sort of thing to get wet through in. One always gets wet through upon these occasions; and, you see, the *mise en scène* demands it. We must always consult our *mise en scène*; it is just the poor wretches like myself who don't, that never advance a step forwarder in life."

"Then we must not wear our black silk dresses," said Prue to Sabina, in an undertone.

"And as to behaviour," the Curate went on, "my notion of behaviour is to do and say exactly what comes into one's head. It doesn't suit everybody, but it is the only way to treat Mrs. De Robert. She sees through people in a moment. Never was such a woman for that!"

"She seems rather a formidable person," said poor Prue.

"I wish we could enjoy the party without having to undergo the introduction at all," added Sabina.

"After all," Mr. Bacchus put in consolingly, "the worst harm she can do you is to give you none of her money. She can't have your teeth drawn, shut you up in a mad-house, or cause you any bodily injury."

"And, as my Edwin was always saying," Sabina put in, "those who expect the sweet without the sour in this life are blinking idiots. If you have enjoyed a country walk, ten chances to one you will encounter an infuriated bull on your way home. If somebody gives you five pounds one day, somebody else is sure to borrow it of you the next. It is a law of Nature."

"There is something in that," said the Curate. "If Mrs. De Robert makes you feel uncomfortable, she may compensate by giving you something; and if she is sweet as honey, yet doesn't give you anything, you will at least have enjoyed the party and the ices. It is years since I tasted an ice myself. I would do anything, compatible with orthodoxy, for an ice!"

What with conversation so agreeable as this, preparations for the gala day, and the usual routine of household business, the interval passed all too quickly under the Curate's roof.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE GALA.

THE day dawned auspiciously. There was a look of certitude about the sky and light clouds. Far away the fells stood out sharp and clear—a sign of fine weather in this region. The birds, too, heralded the morning vociferously, as if they, too, felt sure of fine weather.

“Yes,” were Prue’s first words, as she drew up the blind; “you may wear your lemon-coloured silk, and I my embroidered muslin. And our new feathers, too; we need be under no uneasiness about them. Whatever else may happen to-day, it won’t rain.”

“I don’t see what should happen, except that Mrs. De Robert turns the cold shoulder upon us,” Sabina replied. “But, if we obtain nothing to our advantage, we shall not have undertaken this journey for nothing. Think of the experience of life it has given us, the new ideas we shall take back! I feel a wholly different creature already.”

Alas! poor Prue echoed the sentiment rather wistfully. She also felt a wholly different creature, and in more senses than one. As she laid out the finery she was to wear upon this occasion—the muslin dress, the lace shawl, the Tuscan bonnet with its gay feather—she wondered if anyone would notice her appearance; meaning, by anyone, the Curate.

For the first time in her life she had formed an intimate friendship with a man; the masculine element in her domestic life and society being hitherto represented by stocking-mending for brothers and devout attention to pulpit utterances, with little enough of romance to be got out of either.

This sojourn under the Curate's roof was like a chapter out of a novel. The Rev. Mr. Bacchus was not exactly a hero, an ideal; but he was joyous, kind-hearted openness itself, the sort of man any woman must like.

So, at least, thought Prudence Perfect—a partial judge, perhaps; and then came a vision of Miss Ivory, the beautiful, fascinating Miss Ivory. Yes, hard as it would be to quit Briardale, the sooner it was quitted, the better for her own peace of mind. If she were to stay much longer, she should feel rooted to the place.

Mr. Bacchus came down to breakfast in the highest spirits.

"I don't know how it is," he said, "but pleasure suits me so much better than work! Yesterday, now—why on earth should I have felt ready to hang myself yesterday? Simply because I had churchings, baptisms, burials, everything you can think of, from morning till night! Just because I have nothing on earth to do today but play lawn-tennis and drink iced claret, I feel bursting with happiness. I confess human nature is a perfect riddle to me."

Sabina and Prue laughed.

"I am afraid we are all alike in this respect," replied Prue. "We would rather follow our own inclinations than anything else."

"And why that should be wrong, I can't conceive,"

said Mr. Bacchus. "No, I may honestly say it to you two ladies: no theologian who ever lived, from St. Augustine down to Dr. Pusey, has ever satisfied me, or anything like satisfied me, on this especial point. I wish everybody would speak out with regard to their own feelings, and then we might get to the truth of the matter."

"Here and there are people to be found who would rather not follow their own inclination," put in the metaphysical Sabina. "Joan of Arc must have really preferred not to be burnt, only she preferred in a greater degree to do what she knew would lead to being burnt. I suppose when human beings are nearly perfect, they can turn and twist about their inclinations just as they like."

"So the Romanists pretend," put in the Curate. "But here is another metaphysical problem for you. If they can only arrive at this condition by force—that is to say, by driving their own wills as I drive my pony—wherein consists their perfection? Well, ladies, I must be off to clean the basket-chaise, or it will never be dry in time to start."

The cleaning of the basket-carriage was not the only task on the Curate's hands that morning. What with grooming Jack, mending and polishing the harness and his own boots, the 12-o'clock dinner came all too soon.

"We will start in good time," he said, as he sat down to help the beans and bacon in high good humour. "Always get your money's worth, I say. We don't pay our friends for their entertainment, it is true; but we pay for it in some way or another. I am sure I could have married half a score of couples in the time it took me to clean that pony-chaise."



By dint of great exertions, the little party contrived to get off at an early hour after all. At the last moment, indeed, it seemed as if they should be prevented from going. Georgie tumbled off the garden wall and narrowly escaped deadly injury. Baby turned black in the face and showed symptoms of a fit. The Curate's coat did not come home from the tailor's. Sabina's lemon-coloured silk and Prue's embroidered muslin were not sent back, as promised, from the village dress-maker's. All was consternation, dreadful surmise, and anxiety. However, by dint of patience and energetic action, these obstacles were overcome one at a time; and in jaunty humour the three set forth. The Curate flourished his whip, Sabina and Prue leaned back rosy with pleasure, and, as they dashed past many a handsomer equipage, envied nobody. Break and brougham, landau and victoria, all were bound to the Vicar's entertainment; but so was the Curate's shabby basket-carriage.

Marsden Tower, the seat of Mr. Meridian's neighbour, Sir Charles Marsden, would have seemed fairyland to Sabina and Prue at any time. Not that the mansion had anything extraordinary about it. Belonging neither to legend nor history, its very name was a misnomer, recalling those fortified manor houses so necessary during Border warfare. The ruined tower close to the modern mansion was a mere shell, haunt of owl and raven; while Marsden Tower itself was all compactness, solidity, and comfort.

The fascination of the place in the eyes of most people consisted in the vast wooded park given up to fallow-deer. A more enchanting scene could hardly be imagined—golden glades and dusky shadow of

veteran oaks, with graceful herds sporting unterrified by man. It was a scene out of that poem for summertime, the "Faerie Queene."

The preparations for the Vicar's celebration, and the celebration itself, had driven the herds a little farther from the house, but there they were in sight of the gala folk.

The Curate and his guests had decided to be early; so, it seemed, had every one else. When they reached the park-gates, in sight of the terrace, they found a gay and bewildering company already assembled. The fact is, many had come from such distances that only by arriving early could they rest their horses sufficiently to return by nightfall.

Mr. Meridian was the very person to disentangle himself adroitly from the complications of the day.

The very genius of finesse must have presided at his birth; and, had he not been born to wear the bishop's apron, he might have shone in diplomacy. No sooner did he now catch sight of the Curate at his gates than he hastened to get a difficult business over.

Giving his arm to Sabina and motioning Mr. Bacchus to follow with Prue, he led them straight into the awful presence of Mrs. De Robert. It was a terrible moment for both, not made less terrible by the brilliant crowds, the buzz of voices, the general air of gaiety and expectation, the enjoyment to follow.

"Let me present two ladies to you who have impatiently waited for the pleasure," Mr. Meridian said, as he formally introduced Sabina and Prue to the much-dreaded kinswoman. "They will tell you how much they are enjoying their sojourn at Briardale." Then he turned to welcome fresh arrivals.

Mrs. De Robert eyed the pair with almost a viperish look. What harm was there in them? Of what other pattern would she have had them made? Yet she glanced from one to the other as if Sabina's lemon-coloured silk and poor Prue's embroidered muslin betokened a *demi-monde*—a class of womankind offensive alike to morality and polite society.

"Humph! there is no accounting for tastes!" Mrs. De Robert jerked out.

Whether the remark applied to their appearance or to Briardale, the two friends could not imagine. It was, anyhow, a humiliating one, and destroyed their last remnant of self-composure. Sabina tried to say something, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. Prue could only smile in a meaningless way, feeling all the while ready to cry.

"You may like Briardale, or you may not," jerked out Mrs. De Robert. "Nobody can say it is my fault—nobody can possibly blame me!"

"Oh dear, no!" Sabina managed to get out.

"Of course not!" murmured Prue in a husky voice.

They both looked extremely wretched. Mrs. De Robert laid their depression to the door of Mr. Meridian's hints concerning the property. They were in despair, all but ready to hang themselves because they had come so far to no purpose, she thought.

"It is always so in this world," she stormed on; "if we rescue a fly from drowning, it is sure to be gobbled up by a spider the next moment. The more people try to benefit others, the more harm they do."

She felt bound to make some sort of apology for having vainly aroused expectations, and determined to do it now or never.

"I wish folks could take all they have got with them when they quit this world. What envy, hatred, and malice would thereby be avoided!" she went on. "There is my husband, poor darling!—one must die to be a darling, as I am always saying! If he had spent all he had on a diamond ring, and been buried with it on his finger, how much better for himself and everybody concerned! Well, 'tis no use crying over spilt milk; and the thing is not my doing, abuse me as folks may."

"I am sure no one will abuse you," Prue said tremblingly.

"How you can be sure, I should like to know. I shall be heaped with abuse, I tell you! Only think! That ever such a thing should have happened to me, a stanch Protestant if ever there was one, ready to burn every image-worshipper and Papist I come across—to think, I say, of a claimant coming forward to my husband's property, a confessed, brazen-faced Jesuit!"

"A Jesuit!" cried the horrified Prue.

"A Jesuit!" echoed Sabina, astonished, but quite free from Prue's theological aversions.

"A Jesuit, as true as my name is Sarah Roberts; for you know, that is my name, turn and twist it about as you please. My poor husband stuck to the family motto and the *fleur de lis*, and all the rest of it, as Don Quixote stuck to his barber's basin; but, Lord love you! there hasn't been a De Robert since the battle of Bosworth Field, when the Earl lost his head and title for fighting with Richard III.—two villains together, I'll warrant! However, that's neither here nor there. My poor husband's craze about his pedigree has got me into this quandary, is what I meant to say; and a

rapscallion, ragamuffin lot it will bring about me, I see plain enough."

"I hope not," poor Prue said, feeling half afraid that both Sabina and herself were included in this category.

"Hope that curs won't prowl round the scavenger's cart, and that wasps won't find out the rotten apple!" Mrs. De Robert replied, in the same sharp, peppery tones. "Well," she resumed, more good-naturedly, "there are none of them here, thank God! though why I have come myself, and why you have come, I can't conceive. As if a parcel of old women were wanted at such a party as this!"

This was the most mortifying speech of all. Prue, always youthful-looking for her age, had fondly imagined herself rejuvenated almost past recognition by the white embroidered muslin and Tuscan bonnet with peach-colour feathers.

Sabina, too, could not conceal her vexation. She was free from her companion's amiable little vanities. She did not care a straw whether she looked youthful or aged. Mrs. De Robert's suggestion damped her ardour all the same.

Fortunately at this juncture Miss Ivory came up, beaming with kindness and animation. Who so well able to dispense smiles and encouraging speeches? Youth, beauty, spirit, goodness, seemed the domain over which she ruled with easy sway. Why need she think of herself when there were so many others to think of her? She had but to shine like a star, embellish like a flower, and her task was done.

"Do come and have some tea—the most wonderful tea in the world!" she said, giving her arm to Sabina, while Mr. Bacchus followed with Prue. The Vicar

was already at Mrs. De Robert's side, making fresh introductions. "Then, as it is still too warm for lawn-tennis, we will, if you like, stroll through the picture-gallery and china-room."

"Delightful indeed!" replied Sabina and Prue in a breath. They felt almost as much relieved as some unhappy mariner just freed from the clutches of an octopus. Every step that removed them from Mrs. De Robert helped to restore their spirits.

Then the tea! "It must have cost ten shillings a pound at least," said Sabina; and the piles of strawberries big as codlings, the massive plate, the crystal, the exotics—what an experience to remember and talk of afterwards!

Mrs. De Robert's final innuendo was soon forgotten, too; everybody else was so sociable and so cordial that the pair felt it impossible to believe they were not wanted.

Eugenia introduced them to friends and neighbours. Mr. Meridian, in spite of the numerous claims upon his attention, did not overlook them; Mr. Bacchus was all gaiety and attention. The Derrobbers—uncle and nephew—found them out. Nothing, indeed, was now wanting to their satisfaction and enjoyment.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### MRS. DE ROBERT IN THE CHINA-CUPBOARD.

MRS. DE ROBERT was also recovering herself. She was even beginning to be amused. The belief that she had seen the last of her next of kin, at any rate for that day, had exercised the happiest effect on her spirits. After all, the people here might be dull. They might pretend to find pleasure in each other's society, feeling bored all the time. Mr. Meridian might as well have thrown his money into the sea. Nevertheless, the whole thing amused her mightily. She liked to hear the Vicar's guests talk, to watch how they behaved, to see how they were dressed; and it was pleasant to move about in that spacious park and watch the pretty deer disporting themselves.

In fact, when her host came up with an elderly, agreeable, spiritual-minded-looking man, and introduced him as Mr. Derrober, a friend on a tour with his nephew in these parts, Mrs. De Robert was positively ingratiating. She had got over the trouble of dressing for this party, and she had got over the annoyance of introduction to Selina Beckett and Patience Purfle, as she persisted in calling them. There was no longer any reason for feeling bearish.

"You say you are soon about to set forth on your travels, Mrs. De Robert," said the Vicar, also in high good-humour. "Here is a gentleman who may tempt

you to visit the orange groves of Florida or the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky. My guest is from the other side of the Atlantic."

"Oh! you come from America, do you?" asked Mrs. De Robert, blunt, but affable. "I have a mighty liking for your country, sir; leastways, I should have, if ever I set eyes on it. What I admire in Americans is their good sense about family pedigrees, coats of arms, and such tomfoolery. Just look about you now!" Here she dropped her voice. "There is a Lord and Lady Somebody and a Sir What's-his-name or two here; you will know them by the bowings and scrapings they get. Then a Duke is expected to put in an appearance: the very deer will take fright at that. No: America for me! no flattering, no toadying—every'mother's son on his own footing."

The elder Derrober smiled.

"I fear, madam, your compliments must be taken with some reservation. Is the worship of Mammon greatly to be preferred to that of race and ancestry? Keep your almighty dollars, I say, and give me instead the bones of my forefathers."

"Much good would the bones of your forefathers do you!" retorted Mrs. De Robert. "Money is a good thing enough, if only folks knew how to spend it!"

"Ah, there's the rub!" replied the other. "Even for the wise, what a task to get, much less keep, riches! Did you ever hear of any one able to do it? Our millionaires expend thousands of dollars on a picture or pleasure-garden. How much more expensive, how ruinous, is an idea!"

"Oh!" cried Mrs. De Robert, "it must be pleasant to have ideas, whether they ruin us or not—to be like



Shakespeare, Milton, and Sir Isaac Newton, I mean; but it's my notion they are as much out of date as the Crusades."

"Never believe that, madam," was the reply. "The world wants ideas now more than when Gutenberg invented printing; aye, and will get them, too! As we look around, what meets our eyes but a spectacle of crime, misery, and wretchedness—destined, think you, to last for ever?"

"I hope not, I am sure," Mrs. De Robert replied. "How ideas are to mend matters, I don't see."

"Ah! we want time to talk that out," said Derrober, his face lighting up with a charming expression. "The scene, the hour, the occasion, are hardly appropriate for a dissertation on suffering humanity. I owe you an apology for introducing it at all. What a picture before us at this moment! Yon mottled deer, sporting amid the glades; the little lake, crystal-clear, on the forest's edge—park, I suppose I should call it; the reflections of blue sky and snow-white cloud; the rich foliage beyond!"

"Yes; 'tis a sweet pretty spot. Seldom enough does one get a chance of seeing it," was the answer. "Our aristocrats are a mighty exclusive set. One might suppose places wore into holes by being looked at, so much pains do they take to shut them up."

"Which proves a sad want of ideas on their part," began the other.

Just then the Vicar came up, and, apparently without design, introduced the nephew, as he had before introduced the uncle.

"You can find your way about here as well as myself," he said to Mrs. De Robert ingratiatingly. "Do

let my visitors inspect the picture-gallery and china-cupboard with you, whilst it is too hot for the gardens!"

"I know as much about pictures as most folks," Mrs. De Robert said, abrupt but compliant. "That is to say, I can manage to find out which is the top, which is the bottom, and whether 'tis a sea or land piece. However, we will make our wise criticisms together."

"Mrs. De Robert does indeed know something about old china; and few country houses possess a choicer collection than this," added the Vicar; then he left the trio together.

"Humph!" cried Mrs. De Robert; "I understand old china to my cost, true enough, as the Vicar knows right well. Did you notice his teasing look? I'll tell you about my cups and saucers presently. Let us look at these whilst we have the chance."

The china-cupboard was an elegant little boudoir with a carol window, rose-garlanded settees covered with old blue damask, a French carpet, and light oak cabinets displaying the china to the best advantage. It was a gem, a *bijou*, the strangers said. Other visitors passed in and out; Mrs. De Robert and her companions lingered.

"Now, nephew," began the elder Derrober, "you and I know as much about old china as Cherokee Indians. Let us get all the information out of this lady we can."

"And if she tells us the history and value of every piece, we shall be about as wise as we were before," said the other, glancing round with great curiosity. "But make us see why a bit of painted earthenware, no bigger than an egg and as easily broken, is worth

a bundle of bank-notes; why, when set up under a glass case, people go into raptures about it; ah, then, madam, you have taught us something!"

"Be content to learn your A B C to-day, hoping to be able to read some time or other," replied the elder. "I am thankful to know a teacup when I see it. If Mrs. De Robert will inform me whether it is worth six cents or sixty dollars, was made last century or in this, comes from Holland or Japan, I am the wiser. We can't know and admire everything."

"If people never pretended to admire this, that, and the other, they would save themselves no end of trouble," Mrs. De Robert replied, delighted at such outspokenness. "Well, you need not admire yonder bowl, but just look at it! In Queen Anne's time, this sort of china was all the fashion. I have a very similar one myself."

"It would look well on our side-table—eh, nephew?" put in the elder, with much appreciation. "You must know we are going to build a big house, my nephew and I, and put in all the beautiful things we can lay hands on."

"Oh, collectors, are you? I suppose these gimcracks are scarce in your country? I only wish I could give you some of mine," she went on good-naturedly. "I have a cupboardful that belonged to my late husband, and I am to give it to the first relation that turns up."

Uncle and nephew dared not exchange glances. The opportunity to speak out was irresistible; but they were under a promise of reticence.

"Then I wish I were one of your relations," quietly said the elder Derrober.

"I wish you were, I am sure," was the answer. "I

shall go farther and fare worse, I daresay. An out-at-elbow, tatterdemalion, poverty-stricken set, I am sure they will turn out to be—these relations—when they turn up.”

“Well, you would not certainly bestow your china upon those who had too much already?” Dr. Derrober asked, quietly satiric. “What does Mahomet say?—‘Accursed is he who gives to the rich.’”

“And a fool is he who gives to the poor, because people would not be poor if they had wit enough to get anything, or keep what they got,” Mrs. De Robert said. “No: I have no faith in poor people myself. I don’t mean the folks living in back slums and workhouses; I mean the happy-go-lucky sort of a better class, who make ducks and drakes of any money they can lay hands on.”

Again the strangers winced. The Doctor added:

“Then, if you neither bestow on the wise nor the foolish, your china will go a-begging.”

At that juncture, fortunately for the two men, Miss Ivory and Mr. Bacchus entered the room. They had found Sabina and Prue shady seats in the garden, and were now beating up recruits for the lawn-tennis tourney and croquet match.

“Oh, dear me!” said the Curate, enchanted beyond measure with everything. “Mrs. De Robert and our old travelling-companions from Lodore! How pleasant to meet one’s friends! How delightful it would be to have such a party to go to every day!”

“A hint for Mrs. De Robert,” said Eugenia.

Then she wanted to know if the Curate’s old friends would not join in the proposed games, or, at least, look on. Old china seemed to lose all interest in the younger

Derrober's eye on a sudden. He took up his hat to follow his beautiful conductress, evidently fascinated by the gracious apparition. Miss Ivory needed no gala dress to heighten her beauty. Beholders, indeed, who gazed on the fair picture for the first time, seldom noticed what she wore. They only felt that the whole was perfect.

Eugenia certainly dressed with great care, and was not in the least likely to pay less attention to her toilet than usual on such an occasion as this. Let cynics and censors rail as they may: real amiability, and a sense of what is due from one human being to another, make women take pains to look their best. Uncouth and squalid indeed were the spectacle of society given up to universal dowdiness—the feminine element unadorned or unadorning!

“Who is that beautiful girl?” asked the elder Derrober, almost breathless with admiration.

“I am sure I never know if she is pretty or ugly,” Mrs. De Robert said, heartily pleased to have her Eugenia admired all the same. “You men are all alike! You seem to think women were only made to look at. Well, her name is Ivory, since you ask it; she is an orphan, and lives with me.”

He seemed to ponder. He was wondering, indeed, whether the pair were related; whether Miss Ivory were the rich woman's heiress, and she still remained “in maiden meditation, fancy free;” whether—but thought is swift and conjecture arrowy in its speed. Ere the tall, graceful figure, so appropriately and richly dressed in white lace with crimson roses, was fairly out of sight, a whole romance had been built up in Mr. Derro-

ber's brain. For talk not to us of the romance of youth: 'tis ever outrivalled by the romance of age.

"We're not related," said Mrs. De Robert, as if reading his first thought. "Her parents were sworn friends of mine, and she is an orphan. That is why we live together. An odd taste, you will say, for a girl like that to live with a crusty old woman like me! But Jenny does as she likes; and, if that won't satisfy people, nothing will. She is as happy as the day is long, I can tell you! Well, shall we go downstairs and watch the games, or look at the pictures?"

Mr. Derrober seemed to think watching the games more seductive just now. At any rate, he hesitated between the rival attractions.

Mrs. De Robert said:

"Suppose we just glance at the gallery, and then go downstairs. Always see what you can when it costs you nothing, I say. Ah! pictures I've got and to spare, and they are for my poor husband's relations too. I know nothing about pictures, except that they cover the walls and make a house look genteel. And I daresay you are not much of a judge either?"

Just then the Vicar, with a small but brilliant company, joined them in the corridor. Mrs. De Robert had not the remotest notion that he was seeking her, much less in the interest of more unknown next of kin. Fortunately for her enjoyment and peace of mind, Mr. Meridian acted his part perfectly. Never had his tact served him to better purpose.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### MRS. DE ROBERT AND HER "MURILLO."

MR. MERIDIAN possessed the happy gift of perfect self-reliance. He felt at home alike with lords spiritual and temporal, and with ladies of any rank. No woman, indeed, had ever put him out of countenance but Miss Ivory. In her presence he did occasionally feel at a loss.

When he now came up with an earl's daughter on his arm, and a duke on the other side, he looked by no means as if just put into new clothes, not a single part of which fitted. Smiling, easy, finished, he performed his duties of host in the best possible manner, never omitting, never exceeding—above all, never losing presence of mind in little things. If society itself is made up of trifles, all the more necessary is it to understand the management of trifles.

No one cared less for titles than Mrs. De Robert. She was perfectly sincere when she called the *de* appended to her name, the *fleur de lis*, and family motto tomfoolery. The *de* and the *fleur de lis* and the rest of it, in the case of others, seemed, if not tomfoolery, at least next door to it. Yet she was gratified when Mr. Meridian introduced her to Lady Flora Fairacres, and to the owner of all the hills and dales for miles around. She was gratified because, as she said to Eugenia afterwards, it showed that the Vicar did not look down upon

a plain-spoken, homely old woman like herself. She was gratified, too, at the opportunity of hearing the great folks talk about pictures. Whatever else they might or might not know, great folks who live in big houses do understand pictures. She felt half sorry that her Eugenia was not there to profit by the lesson; only Ivey was so clever, she seemed to arrive at everything by intuition.

"Mrs. De Robert will see here a Murillo as fine as her own, for she is the happy possessor of one," said Mr. Meridian pleasantly, as he marshalled his guests into the picture-gallery.

That mention of the Murillo in Mrs. De Robert's possession seemed to have an extraordinary interest for one of the little party. This was a clergyman, a Church dignitary without doubt, so quietly imposing his air, so great the respect paid to him by all. He was an elderly man of distinguished appearance, from which a certain portliness did not detract. As he glanced hither and thither, shrewd, ingratiating, even benignant, it was easy to see that for some reason or other he felt the liveliest curiosity, not only about Mrs. De Robert, but her companion, Mr. Derrober.

"Humph!" cried Mrs. De Robert, in high good-humour. "A Murillo that is mine and not mine! A houseful of Murillos, always supposing I wanted them, would not do me much good under those conditions."

The clergyman's penetrating look and keen, although discreetly veiled, interest in Mrs. De Robert and her Murillo were not overlooked by his host. Having already presented Lady Flora and her father, Mr. Meridian now added, in the most natural manner:

"His lordship's guest—the Rev. Dr. Robertson."



There was nothing calculated to arouse Mrs. De Robert's suspicion here. Robertson is a name met with frequently. At social gatherings in country places strangers and newcomers are generally presented to the rest of the company, made up of friends and neighbours.

The more frequently Mrs. De Robert was introduced, the better she liked it, and the more civil she found the Vicar. So the little party passed into the picture-gallery in the best possible humour; Mr. Derrober keeping close to Mr. Meridian and the grand folks, feeling sure he should now hear something worth listening to about pictures.

It is inconceivable that Murillo should have painted half the sweet, bright pictures bearing his name. Provided the imitation delights as much as the original, what matter?

Be this as it may, the Murillo here and the Murillo belonging to Mrs. De Robert happened to be very much alike, so said the Vicar, as all stood lost in admiration before the precious canvas.

"Yes; the painter, without doubt, had the same models before him for both Virgin and Child. The details are almost identical. On the whole, lovely as is this group, I prefer your own," he said, turning to Mrs. De Robert. "Happy the unknown possessor into whose hands it is destined to fall!"

Odd as it may seem, Mrs. De Robert keenly relished such by-allusions to her next of kin, and the something they would hear of to their advantage.

She liked, indeed, everything connected with this strange business but the bestowal of the gifts, when it came to a matter of fact. She wanted to be rid of the

property, she had spared no pains to find proper claimants; but no sooner were they in the field, and the division seemed imminent, than she hated having anything to give, and, above all, hated those who had come in search of it.

To-day, so she fondly believed, she could enjoy a talk about her Murillo and its probable destiny.

"'Tis a sweet picture, certainly," she said, "and as like this as cherry to cherry. Whoever gets it will get more than their deserts, that's quite certain."

"Come, Mr. Meridian," laughed the Duke. "You and I have both irreproachable characters. Let us look into our pedigrees. Who can tell with what result?"

"Alas!" said the Vicar, shaking his head. "I have already thumbed mine in the quest till it is now wholly illegible. If I can hear of anything to my advantage, I shall have to be taken on trust, or go to Ulster King at Arms for a new pedigree!"

"You are hardly likely to hear of a Murillo," put in the stranger drily. He had been carefully examining the picture, eye-glass in hand. "I have studied this painter in his native country; I think I know his hand, and it is here. What a dream of beauty! Not only the very place, the atmosphere even, our very selves seem transformed, beatified, as we gaze. But"—here he turned round sharply to Mrs. De Robert—"the proper place for your canvas, if indeed a Murillo it be, is a church!"

"Find me a church built by one of my husband's name, then, and to a church it shall go, as true as my name is Sarah Roberts," was the blunt reply. "I'm not a very good churchwoman, as Mr. Meridian knows; but I don't object to religion on principle."

"Take care, take care!" the Vicar said laughingly. "What if such a church were found? You are bound to keep your word."

"I am not uneasy," Mrs. De Robert answered, jauntily confident, as before. "I've looked into the pedigree myself. My husband's people are not bad, as folks go. I could never discover that one of the name had been hanged for murder: that is something. But they seem to have been a sadly lazy set. Not one, I am sure, ever scraped up enough money to build a coach-house, much less a church."

"Then it behoves some descendant to do it on their behalf. Your Murillo is certainly doomed," was the Vicar's playful rejoinder.

He then passed on with his companions, making a hasty survey of the room. Without any apparent design, the stranger fell back with Mrs. De Robert. The day was warm and glowing. The bustle and gaiety outside soon wearied elderly folks. They dropped on to a sofa in front of the Murillo, glad thus to snatch an interval of rest and coolness.

The best part of an entertainment, Mrs. De Robert always said, was a talk on a sofa, always provided that your talker had some other qualification than a tongue in his head.

"You are a great traveller, it seems, sir," she began.

"I am a missionary," was the reply, the speaker's naturally sweet voice and scholarly turn of phrase making everything he had to say pleasant to listen to.

Perhaps his manner was a little studied, his elocution a trifle elaborate. So few of us take pains to clothe our everyday thoughts becomingly, we must not carp at those who err on the side of niceness.

"My calling has led me into regions named and mapped but yesterday. I have encountered the fierce sun of Central Africa, and the even more terrible frost of Greenland. The missionary, as you know, plants his foot wherever man can subsist. Climate, soil, the conditions of primitive society, are all one to him. With his Bible he faces the wilderness, as the mariner with his compass braves the deep."

"I hope it all does good, this missionarying among cannibals and heathens," said Mrs. De Robert.

The stranger smiled—a meaning, benignant smile. Then he pointed to the picture hanging on the opposite wall.

"Our means are often lamentably inadequate to our ends. We were speaking of this beautiful Murillo just now. Let me tell you what miracles I have seen worked by a picture. You will then understand my remark about your own."

Mrs. De Robert listened delightedly; she liked listening, except when in the church pew. It was then as much as ever she could do to keep silent and awake. She would sniff at her smelling-bottle one moment, pop a peppermint into her mouth the next, surreptitiously munch a ginger-bread nut, take out her pincushion and readjust her shawl; in fine, have recourse to a dozen expedients in order to keep her eyes open. A lay sermon on a sofa was a wholly different matter. The talker is bound to be agreeable under such circumstances, whilst a preacher in the pulpit is bound by no conditions whatever.

"Many years ago, then," began the speaker, "I was despatched on a mission to an island in the South Pacific. I myself gave a name to it, which I will point

out to you on the map, if I can find one hereabouts. A sweet place it was—one vast fruit and flower garden, with groves of orange and palm affording delicious shelter, and green hills softly sloping to the sea. No blot marred its outward beauty. But the human element—the men and women peopling this earthly paradise—how can I give you any notion of the darkness and pollution there? These poor people could not be called fiercely, vindictively wicked. By no means! They were rather blind and perverse, and for a good reason: no voice had spoken to them of good, of Christ.

“Well, we missionaries began by putting a stop to cannibalism and other dire practices. We built a little church, opened a Sunday-school, got the islanders together, and talked to them, as to children, of right and wrong, of duty to God and one’s neighbours; and they seemed to understand. Their intelligence, indeed, surprised us; but to touch their sensibilities, to reach their hearts, to give them a soul—ah! therein lay the difficult, the almost superhuman part of our task! Christianity had instructed, but as yet no more softened than the alphabet and first four rules of arithmetic. We tried what church music and congregational singing would do. They already possessed wild melodies of their own, and seemed a little impressed by the new. We next essayed story-telling, and told the pathetic Bible stories over which all of us have wept as children. Little availed our efforts in this direction. Thus far, they had only exchanged heathendom for Christianity, because reason proclaimed the latter a better polity, a more enlightened citizenship, offering also a safer, more agreeable, mode of existence.

"At last, as good luck would have it, a devoted well-wisher and fervent believer—one of your own sex, moreover—sent us the gift of a picture for our little church; and a very beautiful picture it was, a Madonna and Child, wonderfully imitated from the divine Raphael. I cannot describe to you the effect it produced upon those grown-up children. As they gazed in awe and rapture upon the Holy Mother and her Babe surrounded by angels and cherubim, they seemed at last to understand what devotion meant. The mysteries we had vainly endeavoured to make clear—the depth of Divine love, the manifestation of God in human form, the beauty and heavenliness of purity and sacrifice—now became plain to them. They all wept, and these tributary tears baptised them into the true faith.

"From that time Christianity became a living truth, and was no mere fable amongst these simple islanders. The picture effected what all our efforts had hitherto failed to do. It worked the change for which we had so devoutly striven and prayed. It had given our poor brethren a soul."

"A sweetly pretty story, and very nicely told," cried Mrs. De Robert. "Poor dear innocents! I only wish I had a dozen Murillos to distribute among the cannibals and heathen folks, I'm sure!"

"Count yourself happy in the possession of one," was the quiet reply. "Only be sure that it falls into the right hands. And, now, what say you to a turn round the picture-galley, then a look at the tennis-players?"

Mrs. De Robert expressed herself ready for anything. She was in the best possible humour.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE END OF THE GALA.

THE brilliant entertainment was over, and everybody who ought to have gone home had gone home but Mr. Bacchus. The Curate was afflicted with an amiable weakness, that often brings men into direr scrapes than many an abominable vice. He was never ready to go home. He had never had enough of anything. Seeing that such reluctance to quit our society is the greatest possible compliment anybody can pay us, we ought to feel gratified, or at least treat the offender gently; but no! nothing irritates, nothing exasperates, us like the guest who is never ready to go home!

In this particular instance the Curate's perversity was a real mortification to his host. Mr. Meridian always planned everything beforehand. In order to compensate himself for the bustle and fatigue of the day, he had now arranged an elegant little supper for Mrs. De Robert, Miss Ivory, and himself. The ladies were to drop him afterwards at the Vicarage on their way to Hopedale.

On the face of it, there was an especial intimacy implied in such an arrangement. The party had been given ostensibly to all the world, but in reality to Mrs. De Robert and the beautiful Eugenia. It was hard, indeed, after parcelling out the entire afternoon among a hundred and odd guests, to whom he was comparatively indifferent, that the Vicar could not have the

only one he really cared about for half an hour to himself. True, there was the presence of a third person; nothing like a *tête-à-tête* could be hoped for. Yet he should sit opposite to Eugenia. She would have a dozen sprightly things to say about his entertainment. The banquet of three could but be very genial and compensatory.

Of course, Mr. Bacchus had not the least intention of doing an impolite, much less an indelicate, thing. His own guests, Sabina and Prue, as the night was fresh, had accepted the seats offered them in a neighbour's close carriage. He was free, therefore, to stay as long as he pleased; anyhow, in this light he regarded the situation. The invitation to Marsden Tower was not limited. There he was, and there he meant to stay. Where could he be better off?

With the happy unconsciousness of the born blunderer, he no sooner caught sight of a round table daintily spread in the breakfast-room, of lamps lighted, and chairs cosily drawn around, than he countermanded his pony-carriage.

"Oh dear!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands. "What a pleasant surprise! Who would have dreamed of a third collation! I am sure I was never at such a charming party in my life!"

Mrs. De Robert and Eugenia, of course, could say nothing. Mr. Meridian gave a frigid order to the footman in attendance:

"Be so good as to place a fourth cover," he said, in a perfectly audible undertone. Still Mr. Bacchus remained deaf and blind to the true state of affairs.

"It is very hospitable of you to treat your friends thus, I am sure," Mr. Bacchus blundered on. "Espe-



cially those in my own position, who can make no return except by enjoying themselves."

"A very handsome return, I call that," Miss Ivory said pleasantly. She was anxious to smooth matters without overtly apologising for the Curate's breach of good manners.

Mr. Meridian still remained iciness itself. He was very much ruffled. Nothing discomposes some men so much as an impertinence; at the same time he did not intend to exhibit his ill-humour before his other guests.

"Have the goodness to carve that chicken, Bacchus," he said in the same tones; then, whilst helping the mayonnaise before him, he chatted with Mrs. De Robert. To Eugenia he left the task of being civil to the offending Curate.

In his present mind, the Vicar could talk common-places to any one chancing to sit near him; he could not sufficiently recover himself so as to enjoy a little persiflage with Miss Ivory.

And the more Mr. Bacchus talked to her, the more excited and animated he became. The whole affair, a personal triumph as he regarded it, had been too much for him. He had distinguished himself in the tennis-court, been graciously noticed by the grand folk present—the Dean of Appleford, even the Duke, shaking hands with him; Lady Flora accepting his escort to the refreshment booth; the rich, handsome, and fashionable Mrs. Charleton challenging him at tennis. And then—alas! in dealing with frail mortals like ourselves, we are bound to take material as well as moral causes into account—the unaccustomed cheer had something to do with his exhilaration.

Ices, Italian creams, strawberries big as codlings,

and other regales out of the common way, have an intoxicating effect upon some temperaments. The Curate was a moderate man; but, as he afterwards expressed it, this sort of thing was too much for him. That was the truth of the matter.

The supper proved no failure to Mr. Bacchus, although in the opinion of the rest it dragged heavily. Finally, Mrs. De Robert drowsed, even Eugenia's spirits flagged, whilst the Vicar's share in the conversation became more and more artificial. Only the exuberant Mr. Bacchus rattled on with as much animation as if the delightful day had only just begun.

Mr. Meridian glanced impatiently at his beautiful *vis-à-vis*; for Miss Ivory had amiably consented to preside at his table. Was it possible that she could endure this scatter-brained gabble, this unmitigated tittle-tattle, without losing patience? But Eugenia showed nothing like disapproval. She merely concealed a little yawn with her fair hand, and tried not to look tired. She was ever ready to make excuses for the Curate. His weaknesses only made her smile. The man himself was sterling; she could overlook foibles distractingly odious in the eyes of his own sex. Distractingly odious he certainly was in the eyes of Mr. Meridian just then.

"Insufferable puppy! egregious nincompoop!" he thought, as he watched and listened. Ever an unsparing castigator of men, he was ready to launch out in scathing sarcasms, and thus bring Mr. Bacchus to his senses. But he had no intention of further enlisting Eugenia's sympathies on his behalf. The Curate should never become a make-bate between himself and Miss Ivory. No matter how wrathful the Vicar might be, he remained master of himself, and incapable of doing

an ill-mannered thing. Even when the ladies had gone upstairs to put on their bonnets, he reined in his irritation. The rebuke must be administered another day. He could not bring the Curate to his senses whilst his guest.

But the misguided Mr. Bacchus seemed bent upon bringing about his own discomfiture. Never had any man a more propitious opportunity of holding his tongue. To hold one's tongue is more difficult in some cases than the achievement of Socratic utterances. Mr. Bacchus could as soon have talked like Sydney Smith himself as keep silence when the spirit moved him to speak.

"I am sure we are all over head and ears indebted to you," he began, no more seeing the Vicar's freezing look than if he were mole-blind. "Such a charming entertainment from beginning to end, to be sure! And I hope," he said, with a sudden look of appeal—"I hope I have done my little part?"

Had the Vicar been the soul of good-nature, or felt conscious of weakness himself, he would simply have pooh-poohed his incautious guest and dismissed him with amiable contempt. But not only the Curate's unconcern exasperated beyond endurance: his self-complacency filled up the measure of the other's disgust. Mr. Bacchus, accustomed to such reserve, rattled on:

"This charming banquet, too, the finishing stroke—the acme of the day's pleasure! How thoughtful of you to arrange it! You all seemed a trifle tired, so I talked not only for myself, but for the rest. How fortunate that some people—myself, for instance—never do get tired!"

"Really, Bacchus—" began Mr. Meridian, seriously.

Even that discommending "Really, Bacchus," did not bring the poor Curate to his senses. He must blunder on.

"The acme did I call your little supper—the acme? No: that is yet to come—for you, I mean."

"I have not the remotest conception of what you allude to," the Vicar said, looking daggers.

"Oh, haven't you!" laughed the reckless Mr. Bacchus. He felt at an advantage over the Vicar just then, in so far as Miss Ivory's favours were concerned. She had played lawn-tennis with him; and an admirable player he certainly was: it was his sole accomplishment.

She had been at pains to show all the world that he was her friend. Eugenia's real motives Mr. Bacchus did not divine. She was sorry for him. He was so often flouted, she had determined that he should not be flouted that day.

"Oh, haven't you!" laughed the reckless Curate. "Not the remotest conception—do you mean to say that? And you are going to escort Miss Ivory to Hopedale? I have the greatest mind in the world to ask you to let me do it instead."

"I have the greatest mind in the world to pitch you out of the window," was the Vicar's reply, his patience fairly exhausted.

He had hesitated before at the unpleasant task of rebuking the Curate then. He would infinitely have preferred to put off the disagreeable duty till to-morrow; but the man's impertinence, he now said to himself, was past all bearing. He must be summarily taught to conduct himself, if not in a dignified manner, at least with common propriety.

And underlying all other feelings was the passion of

jealousy. Mr. Meridian would have scoffed at such an imputation if put into words. That he should feel jealous of a poor scatter-brain like Bacchus, forsooth! That he should deem any woman worthy to be his wife who should smile on him! The idea was preposterous! Yet, preposterous though it might be, and indefinite enough as it certainly was, it existed—or perhaps it only now took shape. But for the image of the beautiful Miss Ivory, he would never have dreamed of pitching the Curate out of the window. Those stinging words revealed the truth, and something more than the truth, to his rival. For the first time Mr. Bacchus realised not only how it stood with the Vicar, but how it stood with himself. He loved Eugenia better than anything in the wide world, and so, after his own and different fashion, did Mr. Meridian. And because they so loved her, they were brought to hate each other. Hatred, indeed, it was. One scathing word like a lightning-flash had revealed the depth of darkness beneath. The Vicar stood calm, but white with passion. The Curate shook in every limb.

“Pitch me out of the window if you dare! I have as good a right to mention Miss Ivory’s name as yourself, and perhaps better!” he said, making futile efforts to control himself, with the utmost difficulty all the while keeping his hands off his rival.

“Arrogate what right you please to yourself, but be so kind as to leave mine alone. Don’t you know that you are behaving like a madman or a fool?” was the Vicar’s scornful reply.

He was still entire master of himself, he knew exactly how far he should permit himself to go; but he no longer felt disposed to exercise self-restraint on the

Curate's behalf. He was not going to make a blunder. Let the Curate's blunders be on his own head!

"Not the best man who lives shall call me fool!" Mr. Bacchus cried, exasperated beyond measure, his large, loosely-made figure swaying backwards and forwards in a threatening attitude. "Do you hear?" he reiterated. "You are somebody, and I am nobody; but I won't suffer you to call me a fool, for all that."

Mr. Meridian stood stock-still. The other's menaces only caused him to smile, and that smile galled the unhappy Curate more than a blow would have done.

"Oh! you won't?" the Vicar said coolly. "Then the only thing for you to do is to pitch me out of the window."

They had quitted the supper-table on the departure of the ladies, passing for the sake of coolness into the bay-window at the farther end. The pleasant corner room in which they had just supped, duplicate of the china-cupboard, was on the ground-floor, so called, but raised a considerable height above the terrace over which it projected. A fall from such a window would not inflict deadly injury on a man, perhaps would not break a limb, but it might have very disagreeable results. The Vicar was of medium stature, spare and slight, and had given up athletics since leaving Cambridge. The Curate, of gigantic height, broad-shouldered, accustomed to all kinds of bodily fatigue, in so far as physical strength was concerned, might be called a match for two Mr. Meridians.

"You don't mean to apologise!" exclaimed the exasperated Curate.

"Apologise! apologise!" laughed the Vicar.

Those quietly-uttered words, so full of scorn and

irony, achieved the other's destruction. Why were they uttered? Why did Mr. Meridian, master of himself to the last, not soften matters before it was too late?

A conciliatory gesture, a syllable of excuse, and his rival would have been conquered. But no: that allusion to Miss Ivory was more than the Vicar could ever forgive. The Christian, the priest, the gentleman, were dead within him—only the jealous lover remained. With cynical collectedness he let the other's mad passion have its way.

For, no longer possessing a particle of self-control, infuriated by what he took to be a dastardly insult, actuated by the same frenzied jealousy, the Curate now sprang upon his rival; and still Mr. Meridian remained rigid, nor moved a step. He would resort to no unseemly method of self-defence; no undignified scuffle should save his skin. The aggression, the assault, the blackguardism—thus strongly did the Vicar put it to himself—should all be on the side of his adversary.

Seizing Mr. Meridian with iron grip, his face dark with evil purpose, his gaunt form the very impersonation of vindictive fury, the Curate seemed on the point of wreaking deadly vengeance, when a white figure appeared in the doorway.

It was Miss Ivory; and had it been an apparition of some unearthly messenger, some angel bidden to whisper peace, the effect could not have been more magical.

In a moment, in a second, Mr. Bacchus was himself. Covered with shame, horror, and contrition, he loosed his hold, fell back like one to whom not only the voice of conscience, but of Heaven, had spoken, and hid his face in his trembling hands.

"O my God!" he murmured, "what have I done?—what have I done?"

## CHAPTER XIX.

### BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

“WHAT a charming party!” said Mrs. De Robert next day, in happy ignorance of its tragic conclusion. “And delightful people are those friends of the Vicar, to be sure! That nice old missionary—I only wish I could give him my Murilly for his heathens—and those pleasant Americans! Their mouths are watering for old chiny and anything in the curiosity way; you can see that. I should like to give them all my knickknacks, and have done with it.”

Miss Ivory smiled at Mrs. De Robert’s perversity. She was far from being in a playful humour. Her own heart was heavy enough; not for worlds, however, would she have betrayed her anxieties to her old friend.

“And the poor ladies—are they to have nothing—nothing?” she asked reproachfully.

“They don’t interest me,” was the curt reply. “I can’t help it, Ivey; they don’t interest me in the least bit.”

“But if people do not happen to interest us, they are always interesting to themselves,” Miss Ivory answered. “One human being is of precisely as much consequence as another—in his own estimation, I mean.”

“There is something in that, Eugenio,” Mrs. De Robert said, half-ashamed of her little speech. “And



if only handsome folks and witty folks, and taking folks, got their deserts, 'twould be a plaguey bad world."

"The all-important fact is the having been born, the being somebody at all, it seems to me," Miss Ivory made reply. "Everything else is an accessory."

"So I ought to give some of my poor husband's money to the old ladies, ought I?"

Mrs. De Robert persisted in calling the pair thus, although Prudence Perfect was only middle-aged, and Sabina Ricketts could hardly be said to be old.

"The genteel young man you hope to find may not perhaps have better claims," Eugenia said.

"Ah! my genteel young man—he does not turn up! He is a myth, I fancy. I wouldn't mind about his age if he were genteel—something like the younger of those Americans, now! Nicer men can't be—so vastly entertaining, so good-looking, so polite; and how kind they were to an old woman like myself! But that is what I have always heard: Americans are kind to women, and such indulgent husbands!"

Eugenia smiled, then arched her brows, and seemed on the point of speaking. Then she checked herself with a smile.

"To come back to the property," the elder lady went on. "As you say, these old ladies—Selina Beckett and Patience Purfle—have the De Robert blood in their veins. And true enough, too, one human being, all things taken together, is as good as another."

"In one sense, certainly," Eugenia said. "One has as much right to fair dealing as another."

"Ah! fairness—that is the point! Will Mr. Meridian be fair, think you?—for I must leave the brunt of the business to him. My poor husband had such faith

in the clergy. 'The clergy are so respectable,' he was always saying. 'Get some clergyman to be your adviser.' I'm not over head and ears in love with them myself. The Vicar is a man of principle, and genteel, if anybody ever was; but he has his likes and dislikes. If he takes a fancy to any one of these good people, the rest will have to go—that is my notion."

"He cannot give away what is not his own," Eugenia said.

"But when he has taken so much trouble about the business, I must leave him pretty much to do as he likes. I am sure I wish I had never lifted a finger—left the property to be divided when I am comfortably in my grave, I mean," Mrs. De Robert said with a meaning look.

"Too late to do that now," Eugenia said. "Mr. Meridian would never forgive you."

"Oh! a snap of the fingers for his forgiveness! Much I should trouble myself about that!" said Mrs. De Robert, evidently hankering after a change of plan. "So you think I had better leave the Vicar to do as he likes with poor dear Affie's property, do you?"

"I think it just as well to do a thing, when we have decided to do it, unless it is the jumping from the top of the Monument," Eugenia said. "Once a thing is done, it is off our minds, and clears the way for something else."

"I want this business off my mind, sure enough," Mrs. De Robert said. "A whole year I have thought and talked of nothing else, and what good has come of it all? None, that I can see."

"But no harm, anyhow——" Eugenia said, then paused.

The scene of the night before came back vividly. Had not that painful incident arisen from Mrs. De Robert's "next of kin," and the something they were to hear of to their advantage? She was still in the dark as to the immediate cause of the fracas. Mr. Meridian, whilst handing her to the carriage, had merely said, in an undertone:

"Your friend must have been drinking!"

The sarcastic turn of the speech seemed to refer to Eugenia's former defence of the Curate. Suspicions of the true state of things flashed across her mind; yet how could her own name have been called into question? During the homeward drive nothing transpired to enlighten her. Mr. Meridian was silent, Mrs. De Robert drowsed; the trio hardly interchanged a dozen words.

She was soon to hear the truth. In the hottest part of the day, looking the very image of heat, fatigue, and dejection, Mr. Bacchus appeared at the garden gate. He could never do things by halves. If miserable, he must be as miserable as it was possible for any human being to feel, plunged into the deepest depths of depression and despair; if buoyant, lifted to the topmost heights of airiness and exhilaration. It was impossible to imagine a more woe-begone figure than that now presented by the poor Curate.

He had evidently slept little during the night, and not broken his fast in the morning. His appearance was neglected, his hair and beard dishevelled, and his cheeks were more sallow than ever.

"I am not fit to make my appearance," he began, as Eugenia invited him to an arbour at the farther end of the garden, "I know; but I couldn't help coming.

I've been roaming about the country like a maniac or an escaped murderer since 5 o'clock this morning."

"What good could that do?" Eugenia said kindly, but remonstrant.

"No good in the world, of course; but, when a man is desperate, he does not calculate the effect of his actions: he just plunges from one piece of insanity into another, as I am doing now."

"After all," Eugenia said, "Mr. Meridian is bound to accept your apology. Go to him, make your excuses, and all will be well."

The Curate shook his head, and went on more excitedly than ever.

"He won't even see me! There is more in that than meets the eye. Mr. Meridian is as good as others. I have not a word to say against him; but, when jealousy seizes hold of a man, he will stop at nothing. Mark my word: the Vicar is bent upon ruining me!"

"Nonsense!" Eugenia said soothingly. "Why should he ruin you? But come indoors. I will order some breakfast for you. You must want it, I am sure, if you have been running about the country, as you say, like a maniac, since 5 o'clock this morning."

"I couldn't eat a morsel, to save my life!" replied the poor Curate, wiping his damp forehead; "I couldn't, indeed! And I couldn't face Mrs. De Robert either. I am only half a man in these matters. I can't brazen things out like some."

Miss Ivory was unable to resist a smile at the inconsequence of this grown-up child, and, leaving him for a moment, gave a stealthy order for tea. Tea would restore him, perhaps, to calmness, and, at any rate, have a good effect upon his nervous system.

She then reseated herself, the pair presenting the strangest contrast as they thus confabulated in the arbour—Mr. Bacchus moiled, dusty, agitated; Eugenia the very picture of freshness, coolness, and repose. She wore a neat print morning-dress, white, with tiny spots of colour in it; and thus simply dressed, without a single adornment, she looked a sumptuous woman. She was ever that.

Not a word was said till the little tea-tray appeared. Eugenia met the servant half-way, and with her own hands deposited it on the rustic table in the arbour.

“Ah, yes! I am raging with thirst. I could drink something,” the Curate said, looking ready to cry. “How kind you always are to me—too kind by far! Who else would have thought of tea!”

She poured him out a cup—another—yet a third, and he drank greedily. Then he began to revive, to grow more coherent; in colloquial phrase, to pull himself together.

“Now,” she said, in a tone of gentle command, much as if he were indeed a child—“now, you must really tell me all about this sad business. How came you and Mr. Meridian to quarrel at all, and at such a time? The thing seems quite past comprehension.”

“You may well say so,” began Mr. Bacchus, in a dolorous tone. “But nothing is past comprehension where some men are concerned.” He looked at her with strange wistfulness, and added, “And some women, you know. I must tell you the truth. We were almost ready to murder each other about you!”

Miss Ivory blushed, somewhat taken aback by this brusque confession, in spite of her surmises.

“And of course we might just as well murder each

other, for aught you care. Pray don't misunderstand me—you must know what I mean—for aught you care, after a certain fashion; that is the truth of it, that is what I intended to say. You can't help it, and I can't help it. It is a terrible business," the poor Curate got out.

Eugenia now began to realise how matters stood. A woman sees through brick walls under some circumstances; in this case, feminine tact and insight supplied the details left out of the story.

"When a man really falls in love with a woman who has nothing to say to him, all is up with that man," Mr. Bacchus went on. "I know well enough I might as well hope to get to the moon as to marry you; and I am sure, though it is no business of mine, Mr. Meridian has no more chance of getting to the moon either. That does not signify: we are both ready to do for each other like the veriest cutthroats ever hanged for murder. Ask him if it isn't true!"

"But neither of you are cutthroats; and the Vicar ought and must accept your apology. He cannot do otherwise," said Eugenia, beginning to feel very uneasy.

"'Ought' and 'must' are not words in his dictionary," the Curate went on; "and, I am bound to say it—although he exasperated me beyond human endurance—I had no right to transgress the law. You saw what happened; and what might have happened, had you not appeared exactly in the nick of time, God in heaven only knows!"

With every word from the Curate's lips Eugenia grew more anxious. She was at last realising his true position. She recalled the scene—the Vicar, passive

in the clutches of his infuriated adversary; the Curate's menacing attitude. There could be no doubt of one thing: Mr. Bacchus was prone to exaggerate, but he had clearly stated the case so far—he was a transgressor of the law.

"I am naturally a kindly man," he went on. "I can't for the life of me kill even a rat; it goes so against the grain. But I was on the point of pitching the Vicar out of the window then, and the consequences might have been awful. As it is, they are bad enough. I shall be had up for assault, like some public-house brawler. I shall be suspended, perhaps even unfrocked, and my poor children left without a morsel of bread to put into their mouths. Why are you so distracting?" he said, in quite a different voice, turning upon her sharply. "What is the use of the Ten Commandments, and the truth revealed in Scripture, and the Holy Sacraments, when a woman can turn a pair of well-meaning men—we are both that, I am sure—into demons? These things shake my faith to its very foundations—are enough to turn me into an unbeliever, which sometimes—just now, for instance—I almost feel I am."

The latter part of the speech was uttered with so much pathos and sincerity that Eugenia had some difficulty in restraining her tears. She controlled herself, however; and, avoiding personalities, tried to inspire poor Mr. Bacchus, and to lift him into a wholesome atmosphere.

"Fortunately," she said, "there are some things we cannot help believing in—duty, for one."

"Ah, duty! tell me my duty, and I'll set about it this very moment," was the eager answer. "I feel my

moral sense dead within me. I don't believe there is a crime I could not commit at this moment for your sake."

"Nor a virtuous deed, either, I hope," Eugenia replied, trying to smile at his desperation. "Come into the parlour, then, and write a nice little note of excuse to Mr. Meridian."

"He won't read it," was the sulky reply.

"I will undertake that he shall. You have only to write the letter, and hand it over to me."

The Curate still hesitated.

"You own yourself the aggressor?" she added.

"Oh, yes! there is no doubt of that; and aggressive I feel still. I wish duels were permitted."

"But as they are not, and as people are not permitted to throw each other out of windows either, your only course is to write the letter," was the smilingly reproachful reply; "so let us go indoors, and get the business over at once."

"Apologies should be taken piping hot," the Curate replied. "I was at the Vicar's doors this morning as soon as I could decently present myself. He was at home—I saw him eating muffins in dressing-gown and slippers—but he refused an interview; and I know what that means."

Again she soothed and persuaded, and the letter was written at last. Then, having induced her visitor to eat something, she dismissed him and set out for the Vicarage.



## CHAPTER XX.

### ICEBERG AFTER VOLCANO.

**M**ISS IVORY felt that the most difficult part of her task was yet to come. Mr. Bacchus ever proved limber as a withe in her hands; without giving him a word of encouragement, she could sway him to her will. But Mr. Meridian had no such pliancy in his disposition. He could bend easily enough whilst others did exactly as he pleased. There his powers of concession ended. Cross his will, act in a diametrically opposite direction to himself, and as well try to make two parallel lines meet as bring the Vicar of Hopedale to a compromise.

Moreover, she saw clearly enough that the part of mediatrix ill became her here. What right had she to ask favours of a lover on whom she never meant to bestow any? Not the Vicar only, but the most amiable suitor in the world, would justifiably resent such interference.

Still she determined to try what she could do on Mr. Bacchus's behalf. He was so helpless, so unguarded, so mettlesome, that she inwardly rejoiced in his failure to secure an interview. He would only have made matters ten times worse. No: she would endeavour to obtain something in the shape of a guarantee from Mr. Meridian, who, having once given his word, could be

relied on to keep it, and who at all times had his impulses well under control.

By the time Miss Ivory appeared at the Vicarage gate, he was dressed for the day, and had already got through a considerable amount of the morning's business. Of concentrated mental habits, and very methodical always, he could achieve in a few hours as much letter-writing and composition as would occupy many others a week.

When his visitor was announced, he had no excuse, if he needed any, for sending her away.

A really beautiful woman looks her best in the morning; and there was an indescribable charm, the charm of contrast, about Eugenia's appearance at such times.

The spotless cotton gown, almost as simple as a housemaid's, the absence of anything in the shape of an ornament except a fresh flower just plucked from the garden, the rosy glow imparted by a morning walk—are all circumstances that heighten beauty far more than the glare of waxlights or the sparkle of diamonds or millinery, however bewitching.

Mr. Meridian looked once, twice, thrice at his intruder; but the look seemed in no degree to soften him, rather the reverse.

As he handed her a chair, his manner was cold to iciness; he divined her errand before she could so much as open her lips.

"I must thank you for so kindly exerting yourself on my behalf yesterday," he began, in tones intended to be courteous. "I feel sure that the success of the affair, if success it can be called, is in a great measure owing to you."

Eugenia sat with closed lips; she was hardly pre-

pared to find the Vicar in this mood. She did not feel in the least nervous, only doubtful as to the result of her errand.

"It is to be regretted," he went on, still cold and reserved, "that so untoward an occurrence should have been the *finale*. You witnessed the scene; you saw who was the aggressor?"

"Mr. Bacchus is full of remorse. He called upon you this morning in order to apologise," she said. Then, producing the Curate's missive, she added: "He has now written to you, since you would not see him."

Mr. Meridian took the letter—that he could hardly help doing—but without any intention of breaking the seal. His first impulse was to toss it into the waste-paper basket. Restrained by her presence, he carelessly placed it in a pigeon-hole of his writing-table. Then ensued an awkward pause.

She glanced at the Vicar; he in turn eyed her penetratingly. Neither seemed inclined to speak.

At last, anxious to get her errand over, she asked:

"Will you not accept Mr. Bacchus's apology? He said all that anyone can say by way of reparation."

Once more Mr. Meridian looked at her keenly. When he spoke, his voice was unsympathetic to hardness.

"Let me put a question to you," he began; "and the way in which you answer it will determine the propriety of your interference. I can understand your initiative on behalf of Mr. Bacchus perfectly well. He is a very poor creature, unable to get himself out of scrapes, though marvellously dexterous in getting into them. You come to me, therefore, because you know well enough he is to be not trusted to plead for himself. But what right have you to take such an initiative?"

Eugenia crimsoned, knowing well enough what was to follow. By dint of womanly stratagem she had hitherto contrived to stave off the declaration from the Vicar. Do what she would, she could not hinder him from speaking out now.

"Had you felt and behaved differently hitherto," he went on, "I could understand your present attitude towards myself; but it is inconceivable that you should undertake such an office and deliberately beg favours of a man you have delighted to checkmate and thwart upon every occasion. Were I addressing one of my own sex, I should use less measured language, I assure you."

She sat blushing like a culprit. Eloquently as she could have pleaded for Mr. Bacchus, she had not a word to say on her own behalf.

He went on:

"And what was the tremendous obligation I wished to lay myself under to you, the favour I had to ask? Only the right of speaking out. You know it as well as I do. Not once, not twice, but twenty times, I have been on the point of speaking, and you have prevented me—prohibited were the better word. I am, therefore, prohibited from opening my lips, while you permit yourself to say what you please. And what you please to say now amounts to this—that you cannot trust my judgment in the management of my own affairs."

How could she frame an answer? Mr. Meridian was calmness itself. He was every bit as cool and collected as when preaching a sermon. But she understood the depth of feeling and passion not allowed to come to the surface. His dark brow, his scathing speech, revealed all.

"Are you a coquette?" he said, looking her straight in the face. "Does it gratify you to play the mere woman's game, as if youth, adulation, and trifling were to last through life, and nothing lay beyond? Or have you indeed a heart and conscience, and know not as yet to what uses to put them?"

"I have tried to act conscientiously," Miss Ivory replied. "How could I wish you to speak out, having no satisfactory answer to give? Inclinations are not to be forced. And we were neighbours. It is not my fault that we are thrown perpetually together."

She spoke proudly, though feeling inwardly humbled and meek. With regard to her interference, Mr. Meridian had good cause to complain. So far she felt the justice of his reproaches. In all other respects her conscience was clear. Her behaviour to him had never been that of a coquette. He was blaming her for what she could not help—her indifference to himself.

Mr. Meridian grew sterner and sterner. She knew enough of his character to understand what such severity meant. The tenderness of a woman possessed by some men he lacked altogether. Keen susceptibilities were not his, nor softness and a certain sympathetic quality that often compensate for glaring defects. But he was manly, upright, sincere, and incapable alike of vacillation or sentimentality. Where he liked, he liked indeed; and where he hated, he hated with a will. A man may be amiable or the reverse: an honest, single-minded passion commands esteem always. Seeing how he suffered on her account, although his manner of showing it was far from engaging, Eugenia could but feel overcome with sorrow and humiliation.

"Is this all you have to say to me?" he asked, out-

wardly calm, though she could see that he was shaken with emotion.

"What would you have me say?" Eugenia replied, feeling ready to burst into tears. "You are angry with me for being myself. We cannot become what others would have us against our will."

The Vicar smiled disdainfully.

"Indignant were the better word," he said. "Would not any other man be indignant at such treatment? You regret that we are even neighbours. You would prefer, I suppose, not to see me at all. Yet, as if it were the most natural thing in the world—as if, at least, we were sworn friends, if nothing more—you come to me on such an errand!"

As he spoke he took the Curate's letter from the pigeon-hole and twirled it in his fingers.

"To intercede on behalf of a cowardly aggressor, to take the right of private judgment out of my own hands, to prevent the just castigation of an offence not only against the law, but against the rudimentary usages of civilised society! You must see it. Your attitude should be that of an entire stranger in this matter. You wrong yourself more than me in acting otherwise."

Did he wish to humble his beautiful penitent still further, to wring from her an entreaty for pardon, to see her weeping at his knees? He certainly acted as if such were his intention.

She sat pale, silent, resistless, unable to say a word more on her own behalf. All was plain to her now. Between these two men she was a firebrand, no messenger of peace.

He went on, still holding the Curate's unopened letter between contemptuous finger and thumb:

"I have now said what I had to say about myself. Just a word about this *protégé* of yours. You cannot surely condone such an outrage as he was guilty of last night, and entirely without provocation on my part? I did not begin the quarrel; I was determined not to quarrel. You saw what occurred. He was behaving like a madman, and all about what? The seat you kindly offered me in your carriage for the drive home to Hopedale!"

Putting down the letter, and rising from his seat with a gesture of indescribable disgust and impatience, he went on:

"Were you not a woman, influenced in all things by your feelings, you must see that, putting aside the right and the wrong of the matter, a just, a summary, punishment would be the greatest possible kindness to Mr. Bacchus himself. He is inflated with vanity and self-importance. He will be sure to rush headlong to ruin unless warned in time. I know well enough the arguments on your lips: the disgrace of a conviction for assault, the effect on his future career, the forlorn condition of his children, and so forth, and so forth. What have such questions to do with the criminal intent, the letting loose of unbridled passions? Society would be in a nice state, forsooth, if such madcaps were allowed to behave as they please! However, have it all your own way. You acknowledge that, whilst ready to accord nothing, you are perfectly willing to receive to any extent—a sample of woman's generosity! So take my acceptance of the Curate's apology, and much good may it do him!"

Thus saying, he stooped down, and, using the gold pencil-case attached to his chain, scribbled outside the

still sealed envelope—"Satisfied, A. M." Then he handed it to Eugenia, who rose dumfounded, no longer able to control her tears. The revulsion of feeling was too great. A minute before, and nothing seemed to her more certain than the failure of her errand and the Curate's disgrace. She had the picture before her eyes—his agonised, fruitless remorse; the consternation reigning in his little home; the humiliation of a judicial sentence, however lenient; the lifelong stigma, the poverty, the cares thereby incurred. And now all danger was averted—he was safe! he was free!

"You are very generous!" was all she could stammer forth.

Mr. Meridian's triumph was complete. Beneath that icy exterior glowed something like exultation. He had more than humbled this exquisite, hitherto unreachable Eugenia. For a time, at least, she would surely be crushed, weighed down by a sense of deepest obligation.

Those tears and timid, stammering words repaid him for past unkindness and neglect. She was now so far his debtor that he could ask of her any favour he pleased. Without a word more but of formal adieu, they parted.



## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE WOLVES IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

THE little scene in the Vicar's study remained a secret. Neither Eugenia nor her haughty lover breathed a word of what had taken place. When they met, it was apparently on the same terms as before, and the circumstances now compelled them to meet pretty often.

Whilst driven out of self-defence to take refuge in the persiflage and banter of former days, Eugenia could not for a moment forget their altered position. She drew back startled, almost panic-stricken, as she thought of it; not the Vicar's concession, but his manner of conceding alarmed her. He was by no means given to personal vanity, much less to self-laudation; yet he had put the truth in a way that was very humiliating, and he had put it unanswerably. He was in the right, as it seemed he always was. "Why cannot we love people who are always in the right?" mused poor Miss Ivory.

Then she set to work and racked her brain to find out why she could not love Mr. Meridian. He was high-principled, agreeable, handsome—so, at least, folks said; as for herself, she never thought of his looks. He was universally well thought of and well spoken of, sure to rise in his profession, sure, ere long, to hold a very different and much higher position. Lastly, he was devoted to only one woman—that one herself. Why could she not like him well enough to marry him?

Why was the thought of love-making on his part so unwelcome, even unbearable?

These questions she asked herself again and again without being able to find any satisfactory reply, all the while feeling sorry that it should be so. The Vicar's admiration had long been clear. Not till that last interview had he ever disclosed real depth of feeling, and the thought of his unhappiness made her miserable.

Fortunately, just now there was plenty to divert her thoughts, and matters of a wholly impersonal kind brought them together. This business of Mrs. De Robert's must be brought to a speedy conclusion. Who could effect this but herself and the Vicar? They must put their heads together, and contrive to carry out their old friend's wishes in spite of herself.

She wished to find the claimants and distribute the property, till the claimants were found, and the property had to be distributed! Then alike inclination and purpose vanished. She would fain have the ancestral treasures at the bottom of the Atlantic, and the heirs-at-law myths and phantoms. In fine, Mrs. De Robert, like so many of us, was a bundle of contradictions.

"I don't believe another soul belonging to the family is to be found except the two old ladies," she said confidently to Eugenia two days after the party. "I'll tell you what I'd like to do mightily, Eugenia: give Selina Beckett and Patience Purfle——"

"Sabina Ricketts and Prudence Perfect," put in Miss Ivory mildly.

"As if they cared a straw what they're called provided they get some money," Mrs. De Robert said testily. Then winking her eye, she added: "Well,

I'll tell you what I mean to do, if nobody else turns up; and I'm sure, at least, I begin to feel quite certain, that nobody will. I shall allow each of the old ladies an annuity, and with my poor darling's money found a charity, to be called after him. Then," here she winked again, "the plate and the jewels and the Murilly, and the rest, shall go to you and your first-born son; for of course you will marry, and—I hope—have children some fine day, and your first-born son shall be christened De Robert."

Eugenia laughed merrily.

"Oh! wicked, wicked Roberta! No: it would never do."

"I don't think my darling would be prevented from resting in his grave by that," Mrs. De Robert said. "However, if some one of the true stock turned up—a proper man, the sort of man a girl like you would say 'Yes' to—it would, of course, be better. Deary me, 'tis hard, when we've got goods and chattels to the value of twenty thousand pounds, we can't find so much as a chimney-sweep to claim it all!"

Again Miss Ivory laughed.

"Only have patience, and you will see a dozen chimney-sweeps."

"I hope not. It would be the death of me!" was the reply.

"I spoke figuratively, of course," Eugenia said. "I mean those who want your money, and to whom I suppose, in default of the proper man—the genteel young man—you are bound to give it. Ah me!" she added, with a little sigh, "I confess, for my part, I should welcome even a chimney-sweep with the pedigree in his hand. I am tired of waiting, Roberta. I really do

want to set forth with you, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in search of adventure."

"We'll go to London this winter, anyhow," Mrs. De Robert said insinuatingly. "You will get balls and operas, Royal-Institution lectures, and that sort of thing. Life in London would be all adventure to quiet folks like ourselves."

Eugenia shook her head.

"A sad coming down after Paris, Chamounix, Rome—not to speak of Bongo and Central Africa!"

"Well, only settle this business for me, and I'll go where you please, and stay as long as you please. It little matters to me in what corner of the world I leave my old bones," was the good-natured reply.

The next day Mr. Meridian called at the Manor House just when Mrs. De Robert would be napping. He found, as he wished to do, Eugenia alone in the arbour.

"Pardon me for intruding on you," he said, brief and businesslike. "Many thanks! I cannot sit down: my time is limited—well, just for a minute, then. I wanted to say one or two things. Firstly, to beg excuse for speaking roughly to you yesterday. Under certain circumstances a man can hardly be expected to be amiable. I apologise, and there is an end of the matter. Then I wanted to say, for Heaven's sake! don't let that importuning fool Bacchus come to me full of excuses. I cannot and will not see him. And, lastly, about this business of Mrs. De Robert's. Things are really growing serious. I am in the greatest perplexity how to shape my actions."

Eugenia could well believe it, and her face expressed ready sympathy.

"How is it all to end?" he asked impatiently. "Or

is it not to end at all, but to go on for ever? Mrs. De Robert has found her next of kin. What more does she want? And what are we to do with these wolves in sheep's clothing? How keep them indefinitely disguised? There is the Jesuit father, for instance—a most gentlemanly, agreeable, and, I should even say, a distinguished man. He is at present the guest of the Duke, but invitations at great houses are generally given for very short periods. Is he to go away empty-handed, as he came? Then there are the Americans, gentlemen born and bred, as it seems to me, and harmless enough, in spite of certain odd notions they are said to hold about reforming the world. Is their journey to be fruitless also?"

The Vicar had refused a seat on the plea of hurry. On second thoughts, he accepted Miss Ivory's invitation to sit down beside her. He seemed to have a great deal to say, and to look to her for help in his embarrassment.

"You hoped to pin Mrs. De Robert down to a day of final settlement? Is it so? And can you answer for her when it comes to the point?"

"I think I can," Eugenia replied. "Shall I propose this day month—no claims to be put in after that date; the property to be assigned for once and for all?"

"This day month!" said the Vicar, anxious to get over the business, yet terribly afraid that Eugenia's departure would follow as a natural consequence. "Well, yes—this day month—that is to say, the first of September."

He took out his note-book and made an entry. Then he added with an aghast look:

"And will you meantime help me to entertain these

unfortunate people? They don't appear to be in any hurry to depart. They seem disposed to wait indefinitely on the barest chance of getting something. I suppose that is natural. It is rather hard upon me."

"I am very sorry; I will do what I can," was the reply. "And Mrs. De Robert seems quite taken with them—that is to say, with the last newcomers."

"Wait till she learns on what errand they have come," Mr. Meridian said grimly. "However, I have noted down the day you propose. I will act upon your decision as if it were final; and somebody—it really does not much matter who—shall carry off the treasure."

He looked fagged, worn, and anxious. Eugenia could but feel compunction. She knew well enough what it was that made him spiritless and indifferent to things in general, and his own existence in particular.

He had, however, just one epigram to fling at her before going away. Miss Ivory was unfeminine in this respect—she was no devotee of the needle. When she received visitors, whether in bower or boudoir, they ran no risk of sitting down on pieces of crewel-work or baskets of thread bristling with pins and needles.

As the Vicar now glanced round, he said:

"Nothing looks more like vice than extravagant virtue; and nothing looks more like virtue than engaging vice. I do believe you are the idlest creature alive; and yet what so odious as a woman who never raises her eyes from her embroidery-frame or stocking-mending!"

With a parting glance at her he took cold leave.

She was quite ready to throw heart and soul into the task Mr. Meridian had just suggested. To entertain Mrs. De Robert's next of kin—in other words, to make

perpetual picnics under a glowing sky with excellent company—could but be agreeable at any time to a young lady bent upon seeing the world.

The longed-for adventures had indeed begun. Each day might now be fairly regarded as an adventure, and out-of-door life brought welcome relief from anxious thoughts. As to the wolves in sheep's clothing, nothing could be more agreeable to them than such a change—an *intermezzo* of the little drama in which they were called to play a part.

Summer-time spent under these circumstances possessed the charm of legend and romance. Would it not be easy for the most prosaic mortals in the world to turn into Robin Hoods and Maid Marians if similarly placed? Woodland pleasures in balmy weather, for guide a beautiful girl endowed with rare wit and spirit, a goodly fellowship to boot, and the prospect of seeing everything transmuted to gold on the morrow—a fairy godmother in their very midst!

No wonder that one and all were mirthful, amiable, and sprightly—not a dull clod among them! Dulness was banished, as it seemed, to some far-distant, un-reachable limbo.

As to Mrs. De Robert, she declared it all vastly entertaining; and such a change, after seeing only Hopedale folk for the past twenty years! How pleasant to have no hungry relations prying into matters, on the greedy lookout for all they could get! True, there were Selina Beckett and Patience Purfle; but she must say this about them—they did know their place, and, when matters came to a pinch, would be satisfied with next to nothing.

## CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. DE ROBERT HOLDS FORTH ON RELATIONS.

NEITHER Briardale nor Hopedale can be called show-places, yet few spots in England have more quiet beauty to show. Nowhere is it easier to find delicious nooks and woodland scenes that seem to have been expressly created for happy holiday folk. Briardale itself is so beautiful and romantic that, but for church, post-office, and trim cottages, lovers of the picturesque could not do better than picnic in the village street! On either side are breezy bits of moorland, coppice, leafy woods, and cool pastures, inviting to solitude and repose. Within a stone's-throw of the village, the stranger is as well off as in the forest of Arden; whilst the prospect farther off is one of the fairest in England.

Morecambe Bay is beautiful at all times: alike at high tide, when it shows a vast sheet of silvery water; or when, completely drained, nothing but a brown, velvety expanse of smoothest sand meets the eye. And exquisite the frame of such a picture: rich hanging woods on one side near enough to show the intermingled hues of oak, beech, and sycamore; on the other, the receding hills, gold and violet at dawn and sunset—a pale azure cloud in noonday glare.

In a sweet spot commanding this view, Miss Ivory next day was doing woodland honours. She had



marshalled her little company to a grassy platform not far from the village, whence, in cool shadow all the while, they could behold the vast sun-bright picture.

Sabina and Prue, on the Curate's behalf, were to provide tea; and the Vicar, by way of testifying the sincerity of his forgiveness, had promised to partake. Mr. Bacchus, meantime, was on no account whatever to allude to what had happened.

"You must understand," Mr. Meridian said to Eugenia beforehand, "it never was, and never could be, my intention to quarrel with Bacchus. What, in Heaven's name! have we to quarrel about? But if I yet find myself obliged to administer the sharpest rebuke he has ever incurred in his life, the fault will be his own."

She had too much faith in the Vicar's self-control and the Curate's remorse to dread another encounter. And as yet, although the afternoon advanced, neither Vicar nor Curate appeared.

The little company was in the highest spirits. Seated in a semicircle on the mossy ground, each entertained by turns.

"How well we all get on together!" said Mrs. De-Robert, addressing herself to the supposed missionary; "and shall I tell you why? It is because we are not relations."

Sabina and Prue blushed with a look of downright guilt; the priest and the Americans looked at Miss Ivory and each other, unable to resist a smile. The Doctor was the first to take up the gauntlet.

"Prove to me, my dear madam, that we are not one and all descendants from Adam and Eve, and I accept your proposition. But is not humanity composed of cousins many times removed? Relationship I take to

be like those strong essences concocted by pharmacy. A drop chokes and consumes us—a mild dilution is swallowed with pleasure. Who ever heard of a man murdering his father's brother's wife's sister's son's mother-in-law? while parricide and matricide are common. No: Mrs. De Robert is right; we can live in peace and angelic harmony with everybody in the world, keeping murderous hands alike off saint and demon, provided they are neither our next of kin nor heirs-at-law."

"Pretty morality that!" retorted the elder Derrober. "You ought to blush red as a poppy for uttering it. What will this gentleman, a minister of religion, have to say to you? For my part, I accept your first position, and stop there. Kinsfolk we all are, and kinsfolk we must remain. But Heaven be praised! no law compels us to herd together like a flock of sheep. We may choose for boon companions and sworn friends those of our blood and name who are so much in sympathy with us as to seem our second selves."

Mrs. De Robert smiled grimly. The missionary entered on the lists in mild, bland tones.

"A profoundly interesting and not easily exhausted theme," he said, "and one on which priest and layman must naturally differ. In our eyes, consanguinity holds a second place, and affinity in matters of faith is everything. Were every member of the present company related to me, it would be my duty to love one and all. Are they fellow-worshippers at the same shrine, then are they beloved brethren and sisters, although bound by no tie of blood."

"That is how you missionaries feel, of course," Mrs. De Robert said; "and, if not, poor heathen folk would

never have been induced to wear clothes and give up eating each other. I always put half a sovereign in the missionary plate myself."

"Ah!" broke in the elder Derrober, his face lighting up with enthusiasm. "Let us beware of tumbling headlong into a pitfall! Does not the sublime sentiment of relationship lie deeper than our reverend friend would have us believe? To be kindly affectioned towards those who agree with us in religion—that is to say, in everything—is no hard task. But to love those who swear by the Koran instead of our own Bible; who worship Auguste Comte instead of the Virgin Mary; who go to a Swedenborgian chapel on Sundays whilst the rest of us are streaming into the parish church—there, methinks, lies the gist of the matter!"

"For my part," added the Doctor, "I am never better pleased than when I see people hustling each other about for the sake of religion. It proves that we are not high-class apes, anyhow, as Darwin tries to make out. No, sir," he said, turning to the so-called missionary: "you are right, and that old gentleman yonder, my uncle, is wrong. There will be no more fine doings in the world till the age of religious persecution begins anew, and all who get the chance burn their neighbours for calling their souls their own. But the ladies—have they not a word to say either for their relations or their religion?"

"Suppose they have neither one nor the other?" Mrs. De Robert said provokingly. She delighted in nothing so much as shocking people by little reckless speeches that often meant nothing.

Sabina remained dumb. Prue felt bound to come forward on behalf of the black coat and theology. She might affront her rough kinswoman, with grave conse-

quence to herself. She could not help it. She was one of those women who ought to have lived in the Middle Ages, or at least had something like a chance in the way of martyrdom.

"I don't think," she began, with a little blush of excitement, "that one need be very learned to see the right and wrong in these matters. We have only to think of Eve and the apple, and everything becomes as clear as possible. Had Eve been a right-minded woman and a dutiful wife, we should all be of one opinion about religion, and love each other, whether relations or no, of course."

"I doubt if we should be much the better for that!" Mrs. De Robert jerked out. "However, no one is readier to love their relations than I am, if I could only find them out. Would you believe it?" she said, looking at the three men: "I am in the veriest quandary ever heard of! I want folks who can prove themselves kith and kin—my husband's, I mean; and, though I have spent upwards of fifty pounds on advertisements and inquiries of all kinds, nobody turns up."

"Then," said the elder Derrober, with an insinuating smile, "there is nothing left for you to do but adopt ideal kinsfolk—men and women after your own heart."

"One thing is quite certain," put in the Doctor: "adoption would make a man of me, morally, spiritually, socially. I am in the position of an ill-fated peach. The sun has ripened it, the breeze has sent it tumbling to earth; but there it lies, no one to pick it up."

"I might do worse," Mrs. De Robert said. "You are vastly entertaining."

"Pay no heed, I entreat you, madam!" said the elder, "to this scapegrace, this good-for-nothing, this devil-may-care! If you want no fair-weather concern, but a taut ship that will ride to port through a dozen gales, take me. If adoption is sweet to the young, the lusty, and the hopeful, how much more so must it be to those in the sere and yellow leaf! Adoption, if carried out in a proper spirit, offers a solution of the gravest problems that perplex philosophers. Were one half of humanity to adopt the other half, philanthropy would have said its last word, and this terrestrial globe would once more enjoy a Golden Age."

"Nay," began the missionary, in clear, silvery tones, and smiling as he spoke; "beware, madam, of these un-bashful materialists, these transparent sceptics! Rome, it is true, availed herself of the divine principle of adoption. The Church, and the Church alone, has carried out its true spirit. The aim of Rome was to strengthen her dread empire, and knit in closer bands citizen with citizen. The Church has set herself to diminish orphanhood, to shelter the helpless! So," here he turned once more to Mrs. De Robert with an engaging smile, "adopt me—in other words, the Church—and you become at once the feeder of the hungry, the clother of the naked, the teacher of the ignorant—a nameless providence to thousands!"

"I have not a single word to say against any one of you," was the good-natured reply. "I have not, indeed. I'd as lief see my poor husband's property in your hands as in any other. Only, you see, you do not possess the necessary qualifications. You don't belong to the family."

Miss Ivory looked delightfully provocative. Sabina

and Prue could not conceal an expression of embarrassment. The three men remained perfectly cool.

"Have we ever said so?" the Doctor began. "You never asked us, that I know of. Now, I just ask you to eye that old gentleman, my uncle, yonder. Did you ever see a hungrier, more lantern-jawed face—a more shark-like look? Blanket him like Sancho Panza, and you'll never hear two gold pieces chinking in his pockets, I'll warrant you. Then look at me—yes, look at me, madam! Don't hurry. Take your time. What on earth should I be roving about the world for at my age, a bachelor, ready for anything that turns up? Of course, like my uncle, I'm some poor relation, waiting to be adopted. I couldn't be otherwise. Then cast your eyes upon the reverend gentleman sitting next you. You must know what he is sniffing in the wind! When did a parson lose the chance of pocketing a little money?"

Mrs. De Robert seemed to relish the joke keenly. She thought it the best possible.

"Well," she said, "produce your credentials. Out with your pedigrees, and you shall have anything you like—that I have to give, I mean."

The Doctor rubbed his hands with a look of exultation.

"You hear that, uncle? But, my dear madam, you cannot be serious. Supposing we could all three do this—my uncle, the reverend gentleman sitting next you, and myself. Supposing, I say, we could prove to your satisfaction that we come of the true De Robert stock, would you give us so much as a dollar apiece? Bestow money on a couple of adventurers from the other side of the Atlantic—revolutionaries, dynamiters, for aught you know, in disguise? Fill the pockets of a

missionary, corrupter of the innocent heathen, foister of civilisation and the gin-bottle upon ingenuous Arcadians beyond seas? No, you would not—you could not, consistently with sanity, enrich such a set.”

“What folks would do with the money when they get it is no concern of mine,” Mrs. De Robert said. “My duty is to find the rightful owners; and I shall do my duty.”

“There speaks one I am proud to claim as my kinswoman!” said the elder Derrober, carried away by his enthusiasm. “Madam, I will no longer conceal the truth. You see before you three descendants of that noble De Robert who sacrificed himself for his country on Bosworth Field.”

“Then I will never speak to any of you again!” cried Mrs. De Robert, exasperated beyond measure.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE WOLVES UNMASKED.

SHE did, however, speak to them again, and to some purpose. The cup of ire was full to the brim. It must perforce overflow. Meantime Miss Ivory, calmness itself, waited to pour oil on the troubled waters when the first fury of the storm should have somewhat abated. Sabina and Prue looked the very images of vexation. They had not enjoyed so many gala days in the course of their existence that they could afford to see this one spoiled.

The behaviour of the delinquents was characteristic. The incorrigible Doctor evidently enjoyed the situation. His uncle wore an expression of almost apostolic self-reproach and resignation. As to the missionary—in other words, the Jesuit father—his behaviour was exactly what might have been expected from first to last—that of the finished gentleman, the amiable *savant*, and the consummate man of the world.

“To think,” began Mrs. De Robert, first of all addressing herself to the elder Derrober, “that a man of your years, a Christian, as I suppose you term yourself, and a citizen of the finest country in the world—to think, I say, that you should demean yourself by playing tricks like a schoolboy, shaming your grey hairs by taking in an old woman like me, cajoling and carneying for the sake of filthy lucre! When I say a thing, I



mean it. When I advertised for my late husband's next of kin, I wished to find 'em; and, when I said they were wanted for something to their advantage, I spoke the truth. Why could you not be square, give me an honest tit for tat, say your say, and have done? It was not my business to praise you up to the skies or pick you to pieces. All I had to do was to find out whether you were the right people or no, and act accordingly. My husband's people may be the veriest riffraff that ever were, the tagrag and bobtail of society, the scum of the earth, or angels dropped from heaven—'tis no sort of business of mine. What made you suppose I was not a woman of my word? Ah! I should like to know that. You'll have to throw a little light on the matter before you have done, I can tell you."

The victim of this castigation remained mute, as if born dumb. He raised his hands and eyes to heaven, glanced appealingly from one to the other of the little company, but never attempted to open his lips; and for the best possible reason: he had nothing in the world to say.

Mrs. De Robert paused for a moment to gather breath, then with choler undiminished, and voluble as before, she took the Doctor in hand. If his meek and contrite uncle deserved a birching, surely the unabashed and even jaunty nephew merited little less than the bastinado. There he sat, showing a merry countenance, hands impocketed, just raising himself from time to time on his chair, all the while eyeing his terrible kinswoman with equanimity and defiance.

"'Tis little enough I have to say to *you*," began Mrs. De Robert; "but 'twill be a pepperer, I warrant you! You are a young man—thirty-five or thereabouts, I take

it. How comes it that you should be running about the world in this harum-scarum fashion, instead of staying at home and maintaining a wife and family? What could put it into your head that, were there a million to be disposed of, you would get so much as a groat? Of what use would money be to such a good-for-nothing? As well throw it into the sea at once. I don't wonder, I am sure, that you found your way here in this slinking, underhand fashion. You know you had not so much as a word to say for yourself. But when you took me to be one of those weak creatures imposed upon by soft speeches and artful flatteries you were vastly mistaken. I saw through you from the first."

"My dear madam," began the Doctor, in the most cheerful tones, "never had I a more agreeable task than that of vindicating myself in your eyes. But let me dispose of your aspersions one at a time. First of all, you find fault with me for being a bachelor, and you seem to think that no man can be worth his weight—well, say in hay, that being as cheap a commodity as any—unless he has a better half and a round dozen of youngsters. But, permit me to observe, history proves the exact contrary. The men who have been worth their weight in gold, we find, were bachelors. There is that shining luminary, Newton; that prince of philosophers, Locke—both unmarried men, to say nothing of other immortals, plentiful as blackberries. To have reached his prime and remained a bachelor is the most splendid eulogium that can be pronounced upon any man. He has sacrificed himself for humanity in general, and the good of ages to come. His portion consists of crusts watered with tears, and damp stockings, instead of buttered bannocks, and slippers warmed for him by

a loving spouse. Well, now for your next indictment: I am roaming about the world in vagabond fashion, say you? but consider a moment. I am no fairy prince possessed of an invisible cloak. Science has invented no method of compressing one's ponderosity into a nutshell. I was obliged to come as I am, bring my twelve stone of flesh, bone, and muscle, or stay at home."

Mrs. De Robert was fain to interrupt this tirade and begin her third castigation. The Doctor would be heard to the end.

"Finally, you hurl invectives at me for not having made myself known to you before. The subterfuge was resorted to in order to spare your feelings. Supposing you had conceived a violent antipathy to me, how painful to have to manifest it openly and send me empty-handed away! Such an incognito was dictated by the most delicate scruples that can actuate the human mind."

"A fig for your scruples!" cried Mrs. De Robert. "You are a specious-tongued machinator—that is what you are! However, there is more excuse for you than for a minister of religion. What can you say for yourself?" she said, now turning waspishly to the third delinquent. "Much good have you learned from Bible and prayer-book, whatever you may have taught the poor blackies! I am sure I am as fit to go and convert the heathen myself. How could a preacher of the Gospel reconcile himself to such shifts and double-dealing? What do you set us nodding about on Sundays, except righteous men and duty to one's neighbours, and so forth? But 'tis always so. Those who pretend to be better than others are the worst."

She paused, not from want of arguments, but lack of breath, and the priest adroitly seized the chance of get-

ting in a word. It was the thin end of the wedge. He knew well enough, if difficult for him to stop Mrs. De Robert, still more difficult would it be for her to stop him. Invaluable result of his training! What would not many of us give to attain such perfect mastery of any situation that presents itself—such entire self-reliance under the most perplexing circumstances!

With ready insinuation and a smile, half-sarcastic, half-patronising, he began:

“My fellow-culprits are well able to take care of themselves, or I could say much on their behalf, and every word thus uttered would have double force when applied to myself. If it is natural, even praiseworthy, to desire wealth for honourable self-advancement, the good of one’s family, philanthropic objects, and the like, is not much more to be said for those craving wealth without any personal motive whatever——”

“Hear, hear!” cried the irrepressible Doctor, clapping his hands.

“Plausible as a parson, they may well say!” put in Mrs. De Robert, letting, however, the speaker go on.

“Had I journeyed hither from a remote corner of the globe in hope of mending my family fortunes, placing a son out in the world, providing a daughter with dowry, and obtaining comforts for my old age—where was the blame? But fill my pockets with gold, send me back whence I came a millionaire, freight the ship that bears me with treasure of all kinds—not so much as the value of a loaf of bread should I regard as my own.”

“Hear, hear!” again cried the Doctor.

The elder Derrober listened with sympathetic interest. Prue looked deeply impressed. Sabina enjoyed the scene intensely now that the altercation had taken a

milder form, and she dreaded no more storms. Miss Ivory, making signs to one and another of her guests, demurely passed them a supplementary cup of tea.

"That is always how you parsons talk! You are all saints in your own estimation. But, as this fine talk costs us nothing, let us sit it out!" Mrs. De Robert exclaimed.

More impressively the speaker went on:

"Your money would raise schools and churches in the wilderness, ransom the slave, spread the love of the English name to remote corners of the globe, teach the savage to bend the knee to the only God."

"Hear, hear!" a third time cried the Doctor.

"With aims like these, was I not justified in acting as I have done," pursued the priest, "in taking what seemed the most likely course to bring about my wishes? We have no magic arts wherewith to fascinate others and force them into doing our will: we can but use such weapons as we possess. It seemed natural to expect some antipathy, even prejudice, from you towards one of my calling. I hoped, I believed, that, having learned to know the man, you would no longer recoil from the Jesuit!"

"A Jesuit!" cried Mrs. De Robert aghast; then the recollection of the mysterious letters, "S. J.," came back to her, and she saw it all.

Never had wolf more cunningly disguised itself in sheep's clothing. Her wrath and indignation knew no bounds; but there was something in the priest's manner and appearance that compelled her to exercise self-control. Her cup of ire was full to overflowing. She could not fling sarcasm and invective at him, as at the mute uncle and aggressive nephew.

"Far be it from me to deny my calling," was the quiet reply. "Can any show more striking examples of flesh subdued to will—the human *Ego* transformed into a passive instrument for good?"

"Humph!" cried Mrs. De Robert. "There are two sides to that question. However, go on, sir."

"I will strike out that word 'good,' then, since it displeases you," the priest added gravely, "and say, instead, 'for what he believes to be good'——"

"Hear, hear!" a fourth time ejaculated the lively Doctor.

The speaker continued:

"Now, I take not the slightest credit to myself for the fact, but it is incontestable. I am no longer a certain individuality, like other men—a bundle of personalities. I am a mere agent, an automaton—a piece of machinery in human form. We cannot help ourselves. We Jesuits must be single-minded, whether we will or no. Do we not travel from one end of the known globe to the other with nothing in the shape of property but a Bible? Even that does not entirely belong to us. No matter the climate or the task, the perils that beset us, the privations we have to undergo, true soldiers we obey the word of command, no murmurs ever escape our lips."

"Every word Gospel truth!" interrupted the Doctor.

The speaker continued, with milder insinuation than before:

"Whatever thoughts you may harbour in your mind against my order, let us be reconciled on these terms. I come to you as a mendicant on behalf of the Christ you believe in as well as myself. Whether I go away empty-handed or no, I shall ever bear you kindest feeling; and this pilgrimage to the home of my ances-

tors will be remembered as one of the brightest episodes of my existence. Madam and dear cousin, take my hand in token of reconciliation."

The climax was so unexpected, the sudden turn given to affairs so irresistible, that a little electric shock seemed to run through the company. Even Mrs. De Robert felt the thrill, and looked dazed, dumfounded. Never was painful position more adroitly changed, never stormy feeling allayed with quieter magic.

But when the speaker, not content with taking his kinswoman's reluctantly-extended hand, respectfully stooped down and saluted her on each cheek with the kiss of peace, the general enthusiasm knew no bounds.

The elder Derrober started from his seat as if he had been straightway ordered to do so, and went up to Sabina and Prue, according the same fraternal salute.

The Doctor clapped his hands to see, looked wistfully at Miss Ivory, advanced a step towards her, then drew back.

Uncle and nephew obtained a hand-shake from Mrs. De Robert, neither for the life of them venturing to ask for more.

Then followed a general hand-shaking and interchange of friendly little speeches. All was agreeable flutter and commotion.

Miss Ivory turned to her old friend with the most sparkling grace imaginable, and, as she glanced round with a charming smile, thus commented upon the day's event:

"One thing seems certain: you and I, Mrs. De Robert, hardly need to set forth, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in search of romance and adventure. Romance and adventure have begun at home!"

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### CLERICAL HIDE-AND-SEEK.

**A** NO less curious scene was taking place just beyond the precincts of the little glade.

By dint of womanly tact and diplomacy Miss Ivory had extracted a promise from both the Vicar and the Curate to join her woodland company. If only for a few minutes, they must come, she said, in order to show the sincerity of their reconciliation.

Such an invitation to both was a case of powder and jam. They were to gulp down the nauseous dose of each other's presence as best they could for the sake of a word, a smile, from the beautiful Eugenia. As to reconciliation, there was every inducement to shake hands and appear on friendly terms. Their very existence—in other words, her good opinion—depended on their bearing to each other.

The Vicar, in most matters an exceedingly self-controlled man, able to keep his impulses and passions well in hand, found it none the less difficult to be cool now.

Mr. Bacchus, mercurial, inflated with vanity one moment, self-depreciatory to morbidness the next, felt, as he afterwards expressed it, on the edge of a precipice. He was determined to humble himself in the Vicar's presence, and not to quarrel, even if incensed and exasperated beyond human endurance. But if Miss Ivory's name were brought forward, he could not be responsible for his actions; he could not, really!



Disagreeable as it was to the Vicar to have to meet the Curate, and still more repugnant as it was to Mr. Bacchus to encounter Mr. Meridian, the pair found it impossible to resist Eugenia's fascinations. If the chance presented itself of spending half an hour in her presence, they must seize on it, no matter how dearly they purchased the pleasure. The fire would scorch and inflict cruel smart; the flame was magnetically attractive to these poor moths as to any flitting about our candle. Go to the sylvan meeting-place they must and would.

There was, however, just one comfortable straw to clutch at: they might miss each other, or all but miss each other—that is to say, the one might come just as his rival was departing, or the reverse. A fortuitous concatenation of events might entail upon them only a formal "How d'ye do?" and "Good-day!"

The step taken by the Rev. Mr. Bacchus to insure a solution of the knotty point was highly characteristic. Having finished his sermon, he pulled out of his pocket a penny-piece and tossed up—heads if the Vicar should quit Eugenia and her friends early, tails if he should arrive late. Heads won; so the Curate decided to join the picnic party towards the close of the afternoon.

Mr. Meridian's resolve was promptly made. "That unconscionable Bacchus," he said, "is sure to tire everybody out by getting there too soon. I may just manage to miss him by going at the last moment."

And then he said to himself, and pretended to believe it, that his only motive for going at all was the satisfaction of Miss Ivory. He wished to show her that he was as good as his word, and that the Curate, provided he behaved like a gentleman for the future, had nothing in the world to fear from him.

As ill-luck would have it, the two men timed their setting out so as to approach the meeting-place very nearly at the same moment.

Miss Ivory's choice of a rendezvous lent itself to the clerical hide-and-seek that now followed. Hopeful as they felt about escaping each other's society, both the Vicar and the Curate realised the necessity of caution. Anyhow, they would not for worlds encounter each other on the way.

The woodland meeting-place was the slope of a wooded hill commanding a view of Morecambe Bay. Above this lawnly opening were the coppice-woods, a compact mass of greenery and shadow; higher still, the broad, breezy fell divided by a road.

So long as their road remained in the open, there was no risk of a meeting. The Vicar started from one point, the apex of a V, the Curate from another; they could not possibly meet till they had nearly reached their journey's end. Briskly and confidently they made the best of their way to the edge of the wood; but, when once they plunged in, it was a different matter. The paths made by nut-gatherers and bilberry-pickers were few and far between. They must take the first downward one they could find, or none at all; and every step must necessarily lead them nearer to each other, each supposing the other to be on the way. To meet anyhow was disagreeable enough; to meet in a path only wide enough to admit of one was more than disagreeable, under the circumstances.

The Curate was the first to get into the wood, and no sooner there than his behaviour resembled that of a hare sniffing the harriers abroad. He stopped short, pricked up his ears, glanced hither and thither, although there

was nothing to see but green boughs; went on a step farther, then looked and listened again. No: he could not so much as hear the rustling of a leaf. Nobody was about but himself. At the same time, he discreetly left the path he had chosen and struck into a yet narrower one. Both led to the glade; the last, being beset with brambles, would hardly be chosen by a man so careful of his personal appearance as the Vicar.

Next Mr. Meridian entered the wood. He took the first opening, and trudged on briskly. The afternoon was waning; scant time he should have with the little company at best. He must lose no time; not for worlds would he appear to regret the pledge accorded Eugenia, nor was he less reluctant to seem negligent of her guests. He just glanced round, looked before and behind him to see if anybody was there, then hastened on.

As the pair thus playing hide-and-seek got nearer and nearer to the place of meeting, they must necessarily get nearer to each other, and reach the convergent point of the angle; but, once within ear-shot of the little party drinking tea in the glade, they forgot their own concerns altogether.

The altercation had just begun. The first word that greeted their ears, uttered in a high key and in a well-known voice, told them what had happened. The Vicar's little ruse had been detected. The storm of Mrs. De Robert's wrath was bursting in full fury over his partners in deceit.

Both stood still—Mr. Meridian listening coolly, as if he were a mere passer-by; Mr. Bacchus relishing the scene with a schoolboy's love of *imbroglio* and mischief. The fault was not of his committing. He should get off scot-free this time. He could afford to laugh. Mr.

Meridian's first impulse was disgust. It was a *contre-temps*, a piece of checkmating. He had laid his plans differently, and he did not like to have them interfered with. In so far as Mrs. De Robert's anger concerned himself, he felt no anxiety. It was sufficiently disagreeable to be abused by a woman, certainly. You could not use the means of silencing her that you could naturally use in dealing with a man. But the ill taste, the vulgarity, would be hers, not his own. She might say what she pleased, for aught he cared.

The pair continued to move on gingerly, just a step or two at a time, now halting. Mrs. De Robert's tirades amused them mightily, and they liked to hear what the men had to say for themselves. They very soon became so absorbed as to be utterly oblivious of each other's probable presence. The slight rustling they made was not even observed. With riveted attention they paused and listened. Now it was the Doctor speaking, his crisp, clear speech ringing through the silence of the wood, every syllable being caught with perfect distinctness. Next followed the vehement attack on the priest. High-pitched almost to shrillness sounded Mrs. De Robert's voice, more resembling the cry of some discordant bird than mere feminine utterance. In striking contrast came the soft, silvery tones of her interlocutor. Not a syllable of that well-turned apology missed the ears of the pair, whilst emphatic as the tapping of the woodpecker sounded the "Hear, hear!" of the chorus.

The Vicar and the Curate forgot that little game of hide-and-seek just played so cunningly.

When the priest left off speaking, and a general silence intervened, both became so anxious to see what

was taking place that they made a reckless plunge forward. The path sloped towards a bit of copse bristling with holly and bramble; the copse was on a deeper incline still, and ended in a broad dyke, separating the wood from the open ground. No sooner, therefore, was the hurried descent begun than a halt became impossible. Were a horrid gulf or dangerous crevasse below, the pair, having once begun to go down, must keep on going down; and, precipitate as had been the beginning, still more precipitate, according to the laws of motion, must be the end.

Without in the least suspecting what was about to happen, the Vicar and the Curate tumbled, not only to the bottom of the ditch, but into each other's arms, greatly to their own discomfiture and the consternation of the little company there to see.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### FRIENDS, LOVERS, AND RIVALS.

THE occurrence created a happy diversion. "Deary me!" cried Mrs. De Robert, forgetting what she was afterwards pleased to call that Judas kiss—

"'Jack and Jill went up the hill  
To fetch a pail of water;  
Jack fell down and broke his crown.  
And Jill came tumbling after.'"

Sabina and Prue recovered from the pleasing little shock of Mr. Derrober's salutation. The uncle and the priest looked on interested, but lazy. Miss Ivory and the Doctor ran forward to the aid of the unlucky adventurers. Fortunately, the dyke was dry; but it was deep and choked with brambles, nettles, and brushwood. Heated, discomposed, with rumpled garments, the pair, once at the bottom, found it no easy matter to regain their feet. Mr. Meridian, being the slighter of the two, was the first to emerge.

"*Facilis est descensus Averni,*" cried the Doctor, as he lent him a helping hand; "and ofttimes thorny, sir, the path of pleasure as of virtue. However, here you are, and not much the worse, I hope, for your tumble."

Mr. Meridian thanked him, shook the dust and thistle-down from his coat, adjusted his hat, and was himself in a moment, ready to dismiss the catastrophe from

his mind altogether. It was a trifle not worth thinking about, he said.

The extrication of the Curate was a less easy matter. There he lay, his long limbs sprawling amid the brambles, the very picture of helplessness and dismay. Miss Ivory, however, with her parasol, did good service; and at length he clambered up the steep sides of the ditch. He was not inclined to drop the matter so quickly. Was it not an adventure?—he adored adventures. Had he not evoked sympathy?—he adored sympathy.

“What an extraordinary fact it is,” he said, “one never knows where one is going! We set out for a certain place, and the chances are ten to one that we arrive at exactly the opposite of that place. Who could have supposed, for instance, that there would be any risk to life or limb in crossing that little wood? The wonder is we have come alive out of such a pitfall.”

The Vicar had nodded to the Curate; the Curate had returned the greeting in the same easy fashion. Thus Mr. Bacchus' mind was set at rest. Mr. Meridian intended to let by-gones be by-gones, and be civil. His spirits rose.

“The least you could have done under the circumstances was to break a leg. Think of the romance of the situation!” Miss Ivory said, “the Doctor's skill called into sudden requisition, all of us in a fever of anxiety, yourself the hero of the hour!”

“Ah, a hero! I should like for once in my life to be that. The hero of a broken leg would perhaps be better than nothing. But no: some gloomy prognostic tells me I shall never be even so much. I feel that I am doomed to perpetual obscurity.”

“Renown is the easiest thing in the world,” put in

the Doctor. "Contrive an ingenious murder, and the whole world is talking about you. There is a disagreeable feeling about the thing, certainly; but you can be as sorry as you please afterwards, and that makes all right."

The Curate, seeing himself obliged to pay his respects to Mrs. De Robert, Miss Ivory took up the challenge.

"I hope you do not carry these abominable theories into practice," she said. This stranger amused her. He was not handsome, nor highly finished, after the manner of Mr. Meridian. He evidently paid little attention to his personal appearance, and was natural even to bluntness. But he was very entertaining.

"A villain I am—must be, of necessity," he said. "You don't suppose, do you, that a race is kept alive for six hundred years, unless it consists of the deepest-dyed scoundrels that ever throve on rapine, pillage, and murder? The saints, the wise folks, the meek, have all gone to the wall since history began; and coats-of-arms, family mottoes, and pedigrees just testify to the fact that our especial ancestors were about as bad as they could be—nothing more."

"Would that I were a Montmorency, for all that!" sighed Miss Ivory.

"Would that I could swear my great-grandfather was a grasshopper!" was the reply. "To come into the world unencumbered of ancestral curses and crimes, as Father Adam himself—ah! that is the kind of pedigree I would pay fifty pounds for at the Heralds' Office. However, I have no reason to grumble with a genealogical tree that has brought me great expectations."

"To be realised, I hope," Eugenia said heartily.



“Wish not rashly! What is the thing we wish for when we get it?—mere cobweb, thistledown, soap-bubble! but the condition of expectancy—that is true happiness. So do not suffer our kinswoman yonder to dismiss us summarily. I assure you, I wish for nothing better than to stay here, and never go away at all—live at Hopedale to the close of my mortal career, perpetually waiting for something to my advantage.”

“And the longer Mrs. De Robert waits, the more claimants would be found,” she said. “The De Robert family was given to wandering. One settled in Crim Tartary, and may be married a Circassian; a second went out with an explorer to the South Seas, was made prisoner by the natives, married a maiden, and turned savage; a third disguised himself as a Mussulman for the sake of seeing Timbuktu, and for aught we know his descendants may be that to this day. Now, if Mrs. De Robert could only advertise for her husband’s next of kin in the newspapers, not only of Europe, but of the entire globe, what a motley invasion we should have!”

“Where meantime would be the spoil?” the Doctor said, with a little grimace. “This polyglot proceeding, I trow, would soon swallow it up as neatly as a boa-constrictor gulps down an ox. How sorry I am I did not know of your romantic disposition before! Instead of coming as plain Frank Derrober, I would have disguised myself as a Red Indian or some other equally engaging survival. Your romantic instincts I heartily approve of. To me it is a matter of perpetual astonishment that the human race does not come to a sudden stand-still; that women, be they the most prosaic who ever kneaded a dumpling, can submit to be courted

by creatures, wearing frock-coats and chimney-pot hats."

"Perhaps all is for the best," the young lady replied. "If fine clothes were in vogue with men, would not the last line of demarcation between the two sexes disappear altogether? It seems to me that nothing but the bonnet and the train distinguish the one from the other!"

"It is handy, certainly, to have such distinctions in the case of professional folk," the Doctor replied. "Suppose I had a wife, and that wife were an M.D. But for the bonnet, what *imbroglios* would arise! She blunders in cutting off a leg; I am had up for incompetence. I poison a patient by misadventure; the poor woman hangs for it. Lawyers and advocates too. A nice time they would have of it, united in holy matrimony but for the bonnet! The judge's gown conferred upon Mrs. Brief by mistake. Mr. Brief laid violent hands on by doctor and nurse when his better half is taken ill. The legal fireside would become a Pandemonium, Blackstone a bone of contention, but for the bonnet."

Do women marry men for their wit? Such was the question uppermost in the Vicar's mind that afternoon as he watched Eugenia and her companion. For the first time he began to regard these next of kin in the light of possible rivals. The epigrammatic Doctor disconcerted, even alarmed, him. He saw that these scintillations and flashes of *esprit*, this apt, ready, telling speech, impressed and entertained Miss Ivory—that she was laid under a charm. Dr. Derrober—so, at least, thought the Vicar—had not much else to recommend him. He was confessedly a poor man. He avowed that he had little to boast of in the way of worldly

position. He was wedded to ideas—a speculator, a theorist, an intellectual vagabond, here to-day, there to-morrow, the last in the world likely to win honours or rise in the social scale.

Nor could he be called personally attractive, Mr. Meridian thought; he seemed an excellent fellow in the main—frank, pleasant, far from common, much less contemptible—that was all to be said in his favour. Except for his really remarkable gift of speech, there was nothing to distinguish him from the crowd.

Seeing, however, that he did possess this faculty of saying clever things, and that Miss Ivory listened to him with alacrity, the Vicar did not like the look of it. He determined, by hook or by crook, by fair means or foul, to settle the matter of Mrs. De Robert's next of kin as summarily as possible. The charmer must be forthwith got rid of. Meantime, the worse luck for him! he had delegated the task of entertaining the strangers to Eugenia. Never had over-confidence led him into a graver blunder. From her kindly feeling for the Curate, irritating as it was, he knew that he had little or nothing to fear. But women were romantic, given to enthusiasm. Once their imaginations are touched, there is no accounting for them. Yes, the sooner the pair of Transatlantic travellers were sent home the better.

It might seem inconsistent in Mr. Meridian to dwell upon these matters. After what had passed between himself and Miss Ivory a few days before, surely most men would have given up the case as hopeless. Like the haughty lover in the song, they would have turned from the lady with the farewell:

"If she be not fair to me,  
What care I how fair she be?"

Not of this complexion the Vicar of Hopedale. He was a man of the world, widely experienced in affairs, and possessed a keen insight into the human heart. He knew how often mere impulse and inclination are worsted by force of circumstances; how complex are the strings of action; how motiveless and involuntary appears the conduct of life in gravest crises. That Eugenia did not love him, and would not hearken to his suit now, was no sort of argument that she would never marry him. At least, so he reasoned, as he discontentedly watched her in animated conversation with the Doctor, whilst to his share fell a far less agreeable *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. De Robert.

"You are uncommonly nimble in getting out of a ditch," were her first words, accompanied by a mischievous chuckle.

He coolly brushed some thistledown still sticking to his garments, then added, as he took a seat beside her:

"And as nimble, you must confess, in getting out of a difficulty. You cannot deny that I hit upon a capital expedient for introducing you to those obnoxious next of kin."

"A nice sort of a person you are for a clergyman!" Mrs. De Robert said, no longer wrathful, but nettled at having been taken in. "Up till now I should have believed anything in the world you chose to tell me. Yes, had you said my tabby-cat was coal-black or milk-white, I should have said, 'If Mr. Meridian calls her black or white, black or white she must be, though all the world call her a tabby.'"

"I am delighted to hear you say so," the Vicar replied, following Eugenia and her cavalier with furtive glances.

"Delighted to be told to your face that henceforth I shall never believe a word you say!" cried Mrs. De Robert.

"Believe in what I do, and I shall be perfectly satisfied," retorted the Vicar. "You are, I am sure, at heart charmed to find that these delightful personages are really your relations. You were praising them to the skies but yesterday."

"You won't hear me praise them to the skies any more," was the indignant reply. "Praise people who find pleasure in hoaxing an old woman like me?—not I!"

"Nay, the jest was innocent enough, and perfectly justifiable," the Vicar answered in the same quietly satiric tones. "If all is fair in love and war, all is certainly fair in a game of scramble like this."

He turned to his old friend with a penetrating look, and added in a low voice, only audible to herself:

"You seem to forget that these good people want money."

"Then," she said in a pet, "give 'em the money—give 'em everything there is, and send 'em about their business!"

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### A WOODLAND CONFERENCE.

**W**HAT will not spirit, wit, understanding, do for a man?

Here was this stranger charming Miss Ivory, the fastidious Miss Ivory, by virtue of speech only, turning a common hour and an everyday scene into romance and adventure, riveting her attention as if some delightful drama were being enacted before her eyes!

After the climax and anticlimax that had just occurred, the little party broke up into twos and threes. Mr. Bacchus helped Prue and Sabina to fill their baskets with wild strawberries for the children. Mr. Der-rober and Father De Robert paced the glades, deep in theological discussion. Only Mrs. De Robert and the Vicar remained seated, confabulating amiably as a pair of lovers after a somewhat hot debate. There was this to be said for Mr. Meridian, as she admitted afterwards—he could always talk people over. Were he to encounter his Satanic Majesty himself, and be entrapped into an argument, he would succeed in talking him over.

There was no reason, therefore, why Eugenia and the Doctor should not quit the others. The little wood just above the glade led to a fine bit of breezy heath; and, when once you began to ramble over it, you felt inclined to go on rambling, especially in good company.

The young lady had taken off her hat, and a charming apparition she made, with which to startle the rabbits, and multitudinous little birds piping in the bushes.

Her tall, erect figure never looked to better advantage than in a light summer dress, such as she wore to-day; hers, too, the face to be seen to best advantage out of doors. No more need had the wild rose to shun inspection in the clear light of day, and the one as free from blemish as the other.

The very last thing uppermost in Eugenia's mind was her own appearance just then; nor did she pay the slightest attention to her companion's. He interested her. Could a paragon of his sex do more? She wanted to hear of his history, his past experiences—above all, of himself. The first sympathetic chord touched, the keynote struck of a harmony capable of infinite variation, intercourse becomes progressive and easy.

"You must wonder—you are bound to wonder," he began, "how it comes about that two men, presumably neither dolts nor knaves, should be failures. What good can there be in fellows who have not sense and self-preservation enough to make somebodies of themselves—in other words, to get on in the world? We are not successes, my uncle and I; were it otherwise, we should hardly be here. A couple of millionaires would not be at the trouble of crossing the Atlantic on the strength of an advertisement."

He stopped; and very carefully extricating Eugenia's dress from a bramble, went on:

"Having come, we ought at least to tell you who and what we are. To begin with my uncle, he is a nineteenth-century saint, if any breathes! Cross America by one Pacific railway, recross it by the other, and you

won't find his match; but a dead failure from his cradle, —and wherefore? Because he unluckily came into the world hampered with a conscience. He is a preacher by trade—did you guess it?—and, as a preacher, would have fattened and thriven, but for that terrible business of a conscience. He began—was ever such a piece of insanity?—by preaching against slavery before the War of Secession was thought of; and of course that wouldn't do. They clapped him into prison. No sooner was he let out than he began preaching against fratricidal wars, and of course was locked up once more for that. Then, when things were settled a bit, he must needs take up the subject of political corruption. Could madness go farther? I assure you, although he would never open his lips on these matters, he has been almost as much of a martyr as John Brown or Uncle Tom in the lady's novel. He has just escaped St. Lawrence's gridiron, and that is all."

Meanwhile, one thought was uppermost in Eugenia's generous mind, one question was on her lips she hesitated to utter—Did poverty form part of this evil fortune? Would the money Mrs. De Robert had to give prove a real blessing to these two wanderers?

"Is there a God of Smugness in the Roman Calendar?" continued the Doctor. "Was ever any day dedicated to smooth-tongued slipperiness and unctuous compliance? If so, these be my gods! on their altars shall my incense smoke. Henceforth, I will be warned by my uncle's example, and sleek Prosperity shall be my only fetish. Now, I ought to have succeeded—got on in the world, as the phrase goes—if ever any man did, especially in the medical profession. Never so benignant, so cheery a doctor! Half the folks who came to



consult me I sent away, for the excellent reason that they ailed nothing. Why should people ever ail anything if they exercised as much self-preservation as a hermit-crab? The other half I rated soundly for their impudence in coming to me at all. What business had they with their coughs, carbuncles, disordered livers, dyspepsia, and the like? None whatever. Illness is most often wickedness; disease but another name for vice. If we are not punished for our own sins, 'tis for those of our forefathers, which is much the same thing. I gave it 'em soundly, depend on it!"

"You would hardly get rich on such a practice as that," Eugenia said, smiling.

"I ought to have gilded my horse's oats, like Caligula; and sandwiched my bread with bank-notes, like blockade-runners in the last war. But who was ever paid for speaking the truth? My professional earnings of a twelvemonth came to how much, think you? Just enough money to cover the expense of pens, ink, and paper used in prescriptions. Ah! those prescriptions! I should like you to have seen some of them! Drugs and nostrums were left out altogether. The treatment I applied was of another kind, and far less acceptable. Well, I soon gave up physic, as a losing concern, and took to what is called a professorial chair. That was hardly the thing to answer in my case, either. My pathology, you see, was so eccentric; my pharmacopœia so revolutionary. Before I had thundered forth anathemas on medical science, as now practised, for the space of three months, I was politely asked to resign. That check did not abate my ardour. I said to myself there were more ways than one of putting a truth before the world. First catch your hare, as the cookery-book

says, then proceed to prepare it for table. We now set up a kind of partnership, my uncle and myself; and our first co-venture was a newspaper. I took in hand the facts; my senior, the morality department: the business part of the concern was left pretty much to look after itself. Of course, our newspaper was not to be like other newspapers. News—in other words; the vulgarities, trivialities, and commonplaces chronicled elsewhere—we left out altogether. We wanted, not to tell people what their neighbours were doing, but what they might be doing themselves; not what was going on in the way of politics, theology, philanthropy, and the like, but what ought to be going on. In fact, our journal was a journal of *Might-be's*—of notable *Perhapses*."

Miss Ivory could not resist a laugh.

"Did the paper pay?" she asked.

"Its success was brilliant—for exactly two weeks. For three weeks it was tolerated. At the end of that time, no one would take a copy, even gratis. Nothing so much of a drug in the market as an idea. Of course you have found that out long ago."

"And what was your next idea?" she asked.

"Does all this really interest you?" he said, looking at her suddenly with a penetrating glance. He was evidently struck by her attitude. She seemed to relish the narrative keenly; but was it so indeed? Could it be? Could the experiences of two shabby, wayworn strangers really absorb this beautiful, high-spirited, much-admired girl?

Her direct, artless answer reassured him.

"Why should I pretend to be interested?" she replied quite naturally. "Pray go on!"

Evidently much gratified, the relator continued:

“Of late years, the rest of the Might-be's have been joint concerns, my uncle furnishing the soul, myself the sinews of the affair; in other words, I undertook the practical details, he devoting himself to the theoretical. We were of one mind. We wanted something in the way of existence less cut and dry, less hackneyed, less threadbare, than that with which most people seem satisfied. Our beginnings in this line were glorious. Had you been in America at the time, you would have heard our names noised abroad, I warrant you! Our model society was pronounced to be a foreshadowing of the Millennium itself. We began by ferreting out a few idealists like ourselves, women as well as men; and very charming companions they were. All would have gone smoothly to this day but for one trifling drawback. Sanctify labour by all means. Cultivate the principle of social equality at any cost. Degrade no fellow-creature into a professional turnspit or japper. But what if ye have not so much as a lean hen to pop into the pot? What if the shoes of the community wear out, and there is no money wherewith to buy leather? This soon came to be our predicament. We found out, like the greedy old gods of old, ideas had gobbled up their own children. These co-workers with us in the good cause were all rich in faith and hope, poor in material wealth as the Greek cynic whom Charon bullied in vain for his fee of three halfpence. I think I have now given you a very fair notion of ourselves and our adventures. Whatever we may not be, we are honest.”

There was a touch of wistfulness, rather than regret, in his voice as he uttered the closing sentence; and once more he looked earnestly at his fair listener.

They now found themselves on the breezy ridge above

the wood. A gate invites a halt; and, finding one here, they rested against it before going back.

How sweet and peaceful the scene on which they gazed! They had their faces turned from the bay, and looked on the sweet inland landscape, broken heath in the foreground, delicately empurpled as a plum ere yet its bloom is swept off; beyond, meadows dotted with kine, orchards and gardens from which peeped many a housetop. The venerable church tower was also visible. A warm rosy glow filled the heavens. Sweet scents of honeysuckle and wild clematis reached them where they stood.

"I will say so much for ourselves," added the speaker. "We have never been envious, never wasted a regret upon the snug existence of other folks. As to my uncle, he doesn't know what self means. He is the most disinterested mortal that ever breathed; whilst for my own part, I have been a vagabond by inclination, a ne'er-do-weel, a happy-go-lucky, of my own free will—till now."

He stopped short, and a strange expression came into his face. The careless vivacity, the easy self-assertion vanished; instead might be read deep feeling and passionate introspection.

"My uncle has no need to regret that his life must be pronounced a failure. He has loved all women, and been beloved in blameless, sisterly fashion by not a few. Millions, the most dazzling position, the applause of the world, would hardly have made him happier. My own case is wholly different. I have hitherto laughed sentiment to scorn. I am now justly punished. I have seen the woman who makes me forswear my former creeds. It is all of a piece," he added, after a moment's

pause—"wherever I go, whatever fortunes overtake me, I shall have the Lady of Hopedale, and the scenes through which she moves, before my eyes. The picture is perfect: none I have hitherto beheld are to be compared to it; none I shall ever gaze on in the far distant future will banish it from my memory."

Miss Ivory tried to smile away his seriousness, but he insisted on being heard to the end.

"This something to my advantage, forsooth! Let it go! What more do I want? What else can Heaven give me? I came here poor in many senses—above all, beggared in one. Few men, I suppose, reach middle life without succumbing to a beautiful impression—being wholly mastered by deep feeling. Such, however, has been my own case. I now go away rich, then; for I have at last learned what it is to adore!"

"Had we not better go back?" said Miss Ivory, as soon as she had recovered self-possession enough to say anything.

He assented silently, and, as one in a dream, retraced his steps by her side. The entire man seemed transformed by the mood that had taken possession of him. No more jests, no more sharp sayings, not a single epigram, dropped from his lips that evening.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### THE WOODEN HORSE.

A FEW days later the good folks of Hopedale were in a state of the greatest possible agitation. It had already been noised abroad that something was to happen; in other words, that the climax of the little De Robert drama was at hand. Rumours floated in the air. A speedy transfer of the family treasure would shortly take place, under strictest police supervision. The division of the spoil would follow close upon the heels of this event—and what then? Did Mrs. De Robert and her beautiful companion really intend to quit Hopedale for once and for all? The Wooden Horse as it slowly rumbled through the streets of Troy hardly excited more interest than the vehicle containing these much-talked-of heirlooms. As the cumbersome conveyance, in aspect not unlike a prison van, moved slowly up the village street, guarded by Mr. Rapp, the local constable, all windows were thrown wide, all faces were agape.

The phenomenon, too, as in the case of the Wooden Horse, announced without doubt the close of a long-drawn-out series of events, the final disposal of Mrs. De Robert's next of kin, and of the something they were to hear of to their advantage. Speculation was first busy as to the contents of that well-guarded van. Everybody had heard vaguely of the works of art, the

chased silver, the jewellery, to be distributed among the lucky claimants; but, excepting Mr. Meridian, no outsider had as yet been favoured with so much as a glimpse of the treasures. It was reported that, before their ultimate dispersion, these rarities, owing to an obliging suggestion of the Vicar, were to be exposed to view. In other words, the drawing-room at Hopedale was to be turned into a species of local museum for the space of two days. Mr. Meridian naturally did not wish his parishioners to be deprived of such an opportunity of improving their minds: pictures by Murillo, Rubens, and Teniers, were not to be seen every day.

Besides the heirlooms proper—such as the armour worn by legendary De Roberts at Poitiers and Bosworth Field, the chased silver plate more than once pledged for St. George and Merry England, the jewels worn by fair ancestresses at court—there was a valuable collection of miscellaneous antiquities, amassed by the late Mr. De Robert himself. It enchanted the village folk to learn that these treasures were to be exhibited for the public good. Everybody was to be invited to a *soirée* at the Manor House given in honor of these events.

The Wooden Horse—in other words, the covered van piled to the roof—suggested all kinds of pleasurable excitement. Next in interest came the fate of the warriors. What would be the final issue of this miniature siege of Troy? Was it to be a case of share and share alike, or would one more fortunate than the rest obtain the lion's share? What with one question and another, tiptoe curiosity and liveliest interest were the order of the day at Hopedale. No one had the remotest idea what would be the end of the affair; but end it must somehow, and that soon.

Summer was on the wane, autumn was at hand; and the claimants one and all began to talk of departure. The priest might be already said to have taken his departure from Hopedale. He was paying short visits here and there, appearing at the Vicarage from time to time, and in apostolic phrase charging Mr. Meridian at a convenient time to call for him. Meantime, who so bothered as Mrs. De Robert's faithful henchman? Touchy as she had ever been regarding these next of kin, she bristled up like a porcupine whenever their names were so much as mentioned now.

"Do as you please with the rubbish," she said, in allusion to the contents of the Wooden Horse. "Give it to knaves, fools, or idiots—throw it into the sea for aught I care; only don't let me hear another word about the business!"

Mr. Meridian and Eugenia therefore took secret counsel together, and, in spite of some drawbacks, well were those *tête-à-tête* interviews relished by the Vicar. Lovers of his stamp never lose patience; and, seeing at last that Lewti was kind, he felt momentarily hopeful. Her kindness might indicate contrition, perhaps mere pity: it heartened him, for all that. The real sting of such confidential talks was that they were destined to end so soon.

Mrs. De Robert and Eugenia seemed determined to quit Hopedale, and, when she was once beyond reach, where would then be his prospect of success? The more expeditious his settlement of the property, the sooner they would go away. Yet, so long as the matter was allowed to drag on, he was but keeping a rival in the field. A rival, no doubt, this American stranger was, perhaps with fewer chances of winning the prize than



himself; but a rival, for all that. Vain the effort to shut his eyes to the fact. The epigrammatic Doctor was over head and ears in love with Miss Ivory. She would surely never dream of marrying him; but what if he prevented her from marrying another! Eugenia's friendliness to the Curate was sufficiently irritating. Her growing interest in this stranger seemed little less than maddening.

Yes: the Derrobers must be got rid of at any price.

This business was to the Vicar of Hopedale as a fit of sickness to some unhappy convict. Convalescence means solitude, hard fare, monotonous toil; aches and pains go with comparative ease, gentle treatment, recreation. One moment recovery is ardently longed for, the next it is as sincerely prayed against. Thus was it with Mr. Meridian. Now he wanted this precious business to drag on indefinitely, now he wanted to get rid of it for once and for all. The pangs of jealousy and the dreary void suggested by Miss Ivory's departure alternately kicked the beam.

Eugenia could not help being kind to him now. He was hardly what is called an amiable man, but he had showed great willingness to sacrifice himself for her sake in the first place, consenting to swallow the Curate's affront; in the second, doing everything in his power to further her wishes—to facilitate her departure. It was much more than good-natured, much more than considerate, and Eugenia felt really grateful. At the same time, the sense of indebtedness tormented and oppressed her.

"So far all is settled, then," he said one afternoon, at the close of a longer confabulation than usual. "Keep Mrs. De Robert to her word, and a fortnight

hence there will be nothing to prevent you from going to Bongo!"

The words so jestingly uttered betrayed an undercurrent of deep bitterness. She began to feel ashamed of those harmless dreams, and to ask if she ought not to give them up in order to please others—that is to say, Mr. Meridian.

With heightened colour and some temper, she replied:

"Have not all of us a 'Bongo? Everybody, at some time or other, I am sure, must wish to glance beyond one's own cabbage-beds. Why should I be blamed for longing like a child to go to the fair?"

"Nay—did I ever blame you?" he said in a quiet voice. "You misunderstand me—that is all."

Those proud, cold words made matters worse still. To Miss Ivory's impatient mood succeeded a quick, generous revulsion of feeling.

"You are very kind," she answered, still with heightened colour.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, do not thank me!" was all he said.

The little speech, no sooner spoken, was repented of; and to this outburst of feeling succeeded icy reserve and matter-of-fact friendliness.

No one could be more impersonal than Mr. Meridian when he chose, no one more disliked the notion of unveiling his inner self to others; but, constantly as he was thrown with Eugenia now, reticence became impossible. The figure of the stranger, ever hovering in the background, could not be got rid of any more than that of the Curate.

In the eyes of the world, his parishioners, his friends,

and his household, he was not in the least changed. He went through the routine of daily duty with the same precision. He shirked no disagreeable or agitating encounter. To outsiders he was affable, courtly, and obliging, as before. But all the while a tremendous struggle was taking place within. He was wrestling with himself as men seldom wrestle but once in a lifetime.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### VISIONS OF HAROUN EL RASCHID.

SABINA and Prue sat busily darning stockings when their host burst in with the wonderful tidings. He had just come from Hopedale, and in the village street had encountered the van-load on its way to the Manor—in other words, the Wooden Horse.

“Have you heard of it?” he cried, throwing off his hat and tumbling into an arm-chair, heated and breathless. “Thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of pounds’ worth of treasure awaiting distribution among you all at Hopedale this very moment!”

Sabina dropped her sock and took off her spectacles, Prue laid down her stocking; both looked up with delight and bewilderment.

They were so happy under this friendly roof, so thoroughly at home with the Curate and his children, so much in love with their verdant dale nestled beside the northern sea, that they hardly wanted anything more to happen at all.

The much-speculated-upon, much-longed-for something to their advantage seemed already a reality. Had they not both found what they wanted—romance, new experiences, new interests? To Prue the sojourn at Briardale had been richer in impressions still. She loved the Curate; but, so long as they remained under the same roof, it was a love that made her happy.

"Fetch me a glass of water, Georgie," said Mr. Bacchus, still gasping with the heat. He always contrived to make his parochial rounds and transact other business in the hottest part of the day and under the least comfortable conditions.

Georgie was amusing baby, so Prue fetched, not ice-cold water, but a glass of home-made lemonade.

"Oh dear!" cried the grateful Mr. Bacchus; "how nice it is to be waited on and to get always twice as much as you ask for! That is my case since you ladies came. And there you are, both at it again—mending the children's socks, which I used to have to sit up at night to do before! It was something to my advantage when I got out of bed and let you in that night, and no mistake! Well, to tell you the grand news. A van-load of treasure has just been conveyed to Hopedale under an escort of mounted police, and the distribution is really to take place in a week's time. I wish I stood in your shoes. The sweepings of that van would just set me up for life!"

"Oh! mayn't we just sweep it out with our new broom, papa?" asked Georgie, his youthful imagination fired by this highly-coloured account.

"We may do whatever we like, provided we don't object to being belaboured black and blue by the police afterwards," was the satisfactory reply. "Who could get all these things together is a question that passes my comprehension. Having got them, how any one could keep them is a matter that would puzzle Solomon and the Seven Sages of antiquity. Any addlepate can make a little money. I daresay I could myself if I set to work about it. But to keep a crown-piece when once lodged in your pocket! That requires the quintessence

of wisdom. To go on—diamonds big as hailstones, gold plate enough to furnish the Lord Mayor's table, silver that would coin into thousands and tens of thousands of shillings——”

“And not one odd threepenny-piece for poor me?” asked Georgie.

“Don't interrupt,” Mr. Bacchus said. “Let me tell these ladies how rich they are going to be. Now for the armour——”

The bare mention acted like a galvanic battery upon Georgie. Forgetting all about baby on his lap, he sat bolt upright, staring at his father as if the glorious pageant of Punch and Judy were being enacted before his eyes.

Baby not relishing such neglect set up a yell. Order had to be restored before the Curate could proceed with his narrative.

“I can get over the jewels and the plate,” he went on—“diamonds are dug out of mines every day, and anybody who has scraped up money enough can eat off silver; but, if I live to be as old as the patriarchs, I shall never understand how people can keep family armour—coats of mail worn by their ancestors at the siege of Troy and other great battles downwards! With museums being opened, too, in the remotest regions of the earth, one suit alone, if advantageously disposed of, would make one's fortune!”

“Might you not fit one on, papa?” asked the fascinated Georgie. “I should like to see you and Mr. Meridian *cap-à-pie* with visors drawn, and javelins a yard long, rushing at each other like the knights in Mrs. Markham's ‘History of England’!”

Mr. Bacchus looked as if he should like it uncommonly

too, but once more bidding Georgie not to interrupt, continued:

“Then the pictures! The Murillo itself must be worth the whole village of Briardale put together; and the Titians, the Veroneses, the Last Suppers, St. Peter Martyrs, and Madonna de San Sistos!—I confess myself fairly beaten. I give it up, ladies; you must set to work and imagine it all. I protest I cannot do it for you.”

Sabina and Prue were contented to discern a vestige of reality behind the glimmering haze of the Curate's description. They knew that he had spoken metaphorically, but that the metaphors meant something; and, as said the Vicar of Wakefield, anything, even a gross of green spectacles in shagreen cases, was better than nothing at all. They were alike prepared for the best or the worst. Anyhow, no one could rob them of this idyllic life at Briardale.

“And when you get your great fortune, what are you going to do with it?”

This question was put by the Curate to Prue later on. The children were out with Jane. Sabina was in her room busily at work upon her diary.

“Bina,” had said the ever-sapient Edwin in that immortal courtship, “remember the wise dictum of the ancients, ‘*Nulla dies sine linea*’—No day without its line. Whatever happens or does not happen, put it down. A succinct record of the day's proceedings and probabilities affords the surest index of a methodical mind.”

The indefatigable little woman, partly on Edwin's account and partly on her own, rigidly adhered to this precept, and her book was a bulky affair. She put down everything, whether it happened or whether it

didn't; and a diary is apt to take gigantic proportions under such circumstances.

Prue and the Curate were alone when he asked the suggestive question:

"When you get your great fortune, what are you going to do with it?"

Prue always felt a feminine fluttering of the heart when she found herself alone with Mr. Bacchus. He was quite brotherlike; he had never shown the slightest disposition to sentimentalise, treating her just as he treated Sabina; yet, to Prue, the Curate's presence savoured of perpetual romance. His gaiety, his *bon-homie*, even his boyishness, were very engaging to her. She would not have seen him otherwise for the world.

Thus interrogated, she dropped her needlework and looked up with a blush and a smile. In spite of silvery hairs mingled with the brown, and lines of care, Prue had by no means lost all outward charms. She was one of those women who really never grow old, and who, in a certain feminine sense, ever feel girlish and dreamy.

"What shall we do?" she said, with a touch of regret in her voice. "Go home, I suppose, and never see Briardale any more!"

"I wish you would stay here," the Curate said bluntly. "Not if you really become rich as Jews, of course. My humble quarters would not suit your ladyships then. You might carry me away with you as your private chaplain instead! But, supposing you come off with only a slice of the pudding—just a taste of the goodies—why should you not stay? I would take a better house. We would go in for a sort of partnership. I am sure we should all live together as happily as the people in Noah's ark."



"I am sure we should," poor Prue said.

"Two people can live cheaper than one, and three cheaper than two," Mr. Bacchus went on. "If you both consent, I will see about another house at once. I assure you the thought of spending the winter here alone drives me to distraction."

"It must be lonely for you," Prue put in, with a strange sinking of the heart. She began to foresee what was coming.

"It is more than lonely: it is maddening, and, I assure you, full of peril," Mr. Bacchus went on, growing gloomy and desperate. "If I am left alone in this wilderness of temptation, I cannot answer for myself. You must expect to hear the very worst of me. That is the pass things have come to."

Sabina and Prue had only heard vaguely of the encounter between the rivals, but both could see how it stood with the Vicar and the Curate concerning the beautiful Miss Ivory.

"If you go away, you may any morning, when glancing at the newspaper, find me sentenced to penal servitude for life, or something worse," the Curate continued. "We have patched up our quarrel, but nothing can prevent the Vicar and myself from coming to blows ultimately—about you know whom."

"Do you love her so very, very much, then?" asked Prue, with tenderest insinuation. The next best thing to having the Curate in love with herself was to hear his confidence about another.

"Love!" cried Mr. Bacchus, firing up. "I attach no meaning whatever to that word: it is too hackneyed. It does not meet my case in the least. I am being

slowly envenomed, maddened, unhumanised—that is what I mean by being in love.”

“And is there no hope for you?” asked Prue, her dovelike eyes brimming over with fondest solicitude.

“Exactly as much as there is for any crossing-sweeper at Piccadilly Circus. But there is one comfort—at least, I feel it so—there is no more chance for Mr. Meridian either. If Miss Ivory ever said ‘Yes’ to him, I should be ready to make an end of the Vicar or myself, or both.”

“I hope not,” Prue said, her pious mind shocked at such sentiments coming from the lips of a clergyman. “You would do nothing wrong, I am sure.”

“Don’t be too sure,” the Curate replied. “I sometimes feel capable of crimes that would make your hair stand on end; and the worst—or the best—of it is that no deeds, however desperate, would mend matters in the least. If Miss Ivory had as many suitors as Penelope, and I slew them all like Ulysses, what good would it do?”

In spite of the exaggeration and bombast of these speeches, it was easy to discern the depth of passion underneath. To the Curate, a great grief or a painful discontentment came as to a child. All the world must know, all the world must be in sympathy with him.

“You see,” he went on, “folks may say what they like. There is no one else, search the world over, in the least like Miss Ivory: so natural—in spite of beauty that would turn any other girl’s head—so clever, and so kind. She cannot bear to hurt the feelings of a fly, and I am about of as much importance as a fly in her eyes. If she were to smash me against the window and have done with it, I am sure I should be grateful.

Things are not even in this life: you must have noticed that. If a man is without one thing he is without a dozen. If he has a dozen things, he is sure to have a hundred. There is no law of compensation——”

Prue again looked slightly reproachful, but let him go on.

“Now, is there?” asked Mr. Bacchus. “I ask you, is there any law of compensation? Take my own case. I am a half-starved Curate, eking out existence on a hundred a year. A beautiful wife and a large fortune would make up for everything. But I shall never get one—I mean, I shall never get Miss Ivory! Then look at Mr. Meridian. He enjoys every advantage life can give. They say he is sure to be made a bishop one day. He won’t get Miss Ivory—the Lord be praised!—but a dozen handsome girls with fortunes, and, I daresay, titles, would have him to-morrow, if he asked them. Well, don’t let us harp any longer on these maddening topics. It is quite settled, then? We are all to keep house together.”

His attitude changed suddenly from morbid depression and apathetic despair to alert cheerfulness.

“Your fortune will permit of quite an establishment. The first thing to see about, therefore, is a suitable house. I have one in my mind. Then we must look after cook, parlour-maid, gardener, and the like. And that reminds me—there is a tiptop cook just out of place at Holmdale. I had better go and engage her for you at once.”

“Would it not be more prudent to wait a little, till we see what we get?” Prue said timidly.

“You are sure, anyhow, to want a cook. Still, the house is the most important question to settle. If you

don't mind putting on your bonnet, we could go this very moment and look at that pretty place with a lodge, just outside the village, now to let."

"There can be no harm in looking at it," Prue replied, delighted to see his changed humour.

"Then by all means let us go," was the eager reply. "I know the agent, and a very gentlemanly, pleasant fellow he is. He has given me a lift in his gig many a time. A hint from me, and I am sure he would keep the place open."

They set off, and the inspection proved quite satisfactory. Had they built a house for themselves, they could not have contrived one more suitable and convenient, said the Curate. The grounds were delightful, the coach-house and stabling all that could be desired. Then there were reception-rooms and bedchambers sufficient for the accommodation of a family party twice as large as their own—in fact, everything in accordance with an income of five thousand a year.

"I have made up my mind that your share will amount to that," said the delighted Mr. Bacchus. "It really cannot be less. And, if we get in at once, it would not be too late for a garden-party—the very thing by way of inauguration. I will write out a list of invitations the first thing on reaching home."

Pleased to see him pleased, poor Prue made a show of enthusiasm, though her heart sank within her. She was in the same predicament as himself. The visionary five thousand a year touched her imagination coldly; but had the Curate asked her to share his poverty—ah! that would have been rapture, something to her advantage indeed!

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### MRS. DE ROBERT TAKES TO HER BED.

**I**F the sight of the Wooden Horse struck awe into the souls of the beleaguered Trojans, still deeper was the effect wrought on Mrs. De Robert's mind by the vanload of treasure, as, under police escort, it slowly wound its way to the Manor.

We are not told that the Trojans took to their beds, but such was the plight to which Mrs. De Robert was reduced by that portentous spectacle. She had a way of taking to her bed whenever things went wrong; and a very comfortable way it is for all concerned. If we could all take to our beds till the moment of perturbation is over—be it ill-temper, low spirits, a worrying fit, or any other abnormal humour—how much easier everyday life would become! As a rule, people nowadays do not spend nearly enough time in bed. We air our worries abroad too much. We are not sufficiently ashamed of being uncomfortable.

Mrs. De Robert was certainly a superior person in this respect. She did take pains to keep out of everybody's way when everybody was odious to her—except Miss Ivory, of course. Never was her belief in Eugenia more delightful to witness than during these crises. The young lady would straightway don the most charming little bib and apron in the world, and hover about the sick-room, plying her patient with mutton-broth

and jelly—in fact, treating her exactly as if she were suddenly stricken down with ague or rheumatism.

“Are you better, Roberta?” she would say, in a voice of affectionate solicitude. At the same time she was not beguiled with the least dissimulation. She never minced matters, or called Mrs. De Robert’s indisposition by fictitious names. The bouts of ill-humour were so many ailments, to be nursed, physicked, and got rid of.

“Just think!” Mrs. De Robert said, when the sharpness of the attack had been in some measure subdued by this judicious treatment: “these Murillys and curiosities might have made a fine show for us at Bath or Brighton. We could have given entertainments to all the celebrities who visited the place. We should have been so looked up to, so well thought of!”

“After all,” Eugenia said, as she stood by the sick-bed, gruel-basin in hand, “we could not have taken this van-load with us on our travels. It is really a far greater worry to have curiosities than not to have them. You can neither eat, drink, nor wear them; but there they are, filling up room, in everybody’s way, a perfect nuisance to housemaids.”

“There is something in that, Eugenio,” was the reply from the nightcapped patient reposing in the curtained four-poster; “and, if only decent folks had come after them, I should have been the last person in the world to utter a murmur. I wanted to be rid of the rubbish. I wanted to be free to roam about the world like Moll Flanders and Peregrine Pickle. But to think that so much as a farthing’s worth of my poor Affie’s property should go to a rapscaillon lot like this: a double-faced, thumb-screwing Jesuit; a couple of

Mormons, with who knows how many wives left at home; and two cheese-paring old maids! No, Ivey; I shall never get over it as long as I live—never, never!”

“In one sense you will get over it,” said the ever-ready comforter. “You won’t have to do it again.”

“You are right there,” Mrs. De Robert replied, with more energy. “Tell Mr. Meridian to make haste, then. Never, I do honestly believe, was such a man for dawdling. The things have come; the people are here. Why on earth should he shilly-shally in this exasperating fashion? He has had time to settle the business a dozen times over.”

“Who knows but that this delay may turn out the greatest possible blessing?—at the eleventh hour the very person you have desired coming forward and claiming the property!”

“I wish he would, I am sure! Nothing would please me better than to send these people about their business. It would exactly serve them right. What could that scatter-brain—Lord forgive me!—what could my poor darling have been thinking about when he left me such a job as this! True enough, I proposed it myself. I thought it would make him so comfortable in his grave. And this worry is all I get for my pains.”

“But a good deal of agreeable conversation—you forget that,” put in Eugenia.

“Humph!” said Mrs. De Robert, with her little rasping laugh. “You would get agreeable conversation out of a gate-post on those terms! However, I am glad if the whole thing has amused you, Jenny.”

“Immensely!” Miss Ivory answered. “I can afford to like these good people, you see! They have nothing to get out of me. I must say I think them quite above

the ordinary run. There is the Jesuit father, for instance! Put the thumb-screw, Galileo, and Joan of Arc out of your mind, and can you imagine a more entertaining, delightful talker! And so distinguished—every inch a gentleman!"

"He entertained me vastly before I knew who he was, I must say," Mrs. De Robert said.

"And after all," Miss Ivory added, pursuing her advantage, "the thumb-screw, Galileo, or Joan of Arc have nothing more to do with him than you and I have to do with the two little princes smothered in the Tower. I don't suppose he would himself tread on a worm."

"He seems a mild, kind-hearted, gentlemanly old fellow, certainly," was the reply.

"As to his Jesuitical ways," continued the young lady, "there can be no real harm in teaching poor savages to leave off eating each other and cover their nakedness. At any rate, they are no worse off than they were before."

"True enough, that," Mrs. De Robert said, as she reposed on her pillows.

"Then again, supposing—I am only supposing—that anybody gave him a beautiful picture—say by Murillo or any other celebrated painter. It seems to me the South Sea Islanders want it much more than we English people do."

"Poor innocents! yes," was the answer.

"And with regard to the two Mormons, as you call them," Miss Ivory went on, "they seem as good and kind as can be. If each has a dozen wives and makes all happy, it surely speaks volumes in their favour! How many husbands do not take the trouble even to please one!"



"You are right there!" Mrs. De Robert cried, quite cheerfully.

"The fact of having no money is surely not to be assumed to their discredit," Eugenia added. "We can never be sure how people come by their large fortunes; but one thing we may be sure of: when we find them without, they are not living on fraud and spoliation."

"On my word, that is just what I feel!" was the answer. "I was never fond of money-getting folks myself. The pair of Yankees are honest enough, I'll be bound!"

"It is on the whole much pleasanter to give money or anything else to those who want it than to those who have too much already. What would you have said at the sight of a Frankfort Jew or a Levantine usurer?"

"I believe it would have been the death of me. I always hoped poor dear Affie's property would comfort some poor soul in distress."

"Which it certainly will do," Eugenia said coolly. "A fourth part, a sixth of the money will be comparative wealth to the two ladies; whilst the rest, equally divided——"

"Don't talk of it," Mrs. De Robert said. "I'm like the folks who like to fancy themselves a-dying. When there seems any chance of it, they would take all the drugs in an apothecary's shop to get well again. Oh dear! oh dear! why can't people take their belongings with them? Who would have thought Affie's whim would prove such a plague to me?"

"You will be better soon," Eugenia said soothingly. "And the sooner the better—for me."

"Yes, I want to get well for your sake, Jenny. We'll

be gadding about then somewhere. But here I am, easy and comfortable in my bed; and here I mean to stay till the business is over."

"Will you have a cup of arrowroot by-and-by?" asked Eugenia, with fond solicitude; "or a little tea and toast?—that, I think, would not hurt you."

"Just what you please. Give me anything you like," Mrs. De Robert said; "only don't let Mr. Meridian come to bother me."

"He shall bother me instead," was the suave reply; "and of course, Roberta, he won't expect to see you till you are well enough to be downstairs again. Even Mr. Meridian would not ask an audience of you in your nightcap!"

"I shan't go downstairs till the van-load is unpacked and the people sent about their business," said the invalid, turning her head on the pillow for a comfortable nap.

Miss Ivory, perceiving the Vicar at the garden-gate, hastened downstairs just as she was; and well did that pretty white nursing-apron become her.

"How is Mrs. De Robert this afternoon?" asked the visitor, in the most matter-of-fact way.

"Rather better, thank you," Eugenia replied as gravely as possible.

It was not the first occasion on which the Vicar had made such inquiries. Mrs. De Robert's singularities were tolerably familiar to him by this time, and he humoured them, or at any rate ignored them, when politeness required. An old writer defines a philosopher as what is meant by a gentleman, and certainly there is a kind of philosophy which may better be described as good manners than anything else.

"Will she be downstairs to-morrow, think you?" again he asked.

"I fear not; but it depends upon circumstances. When is the unpacking to begin?"

The Vicar looked at Eugenia. Eugenia looked at the Vicar.

"Not till the last moment," he said, adding mysteriously: "You don't suppose, do you, that Mrs. De Robert would part with any of her treasures after having once more enjoyed the sight of them? They must be kept out of her sight—spirited away. But I have arranged everything. Trust to my management."

"If you cannot manage the business, no one can; and I am sure you will satisfy everybody," said Eugenia.

"The question—from Mrs. De Robert's point of view, at least—is not to satisfy these good people, but to get rid of them," the Vicar said, with a touch of malicious satisfaction, the image of the epigrammatic Doctor rising before him. "And got rid of they shall be. I promise that. Before another week is over, not a fraction of the treasure, not a claimant, shall be left in the place."

"Unless others appear at the eleventh hour!"

"I have provided against that emergency," was the prompt reply. "One-sixth part is to be retained for a certain period, in case of such tardy applications being made. Failing this, it will be divided amongst the rest."

"And is the money to be equally portioned out?" asked Miss Ivory, sympathetically anxious.

"You will see when the time comes," he said, in the same quick, decided tones. "As Mrs. De Robert has now left every detail to me, it is advisable to keep my own counsel. Were you put in possession of my pro-

gramme, she would ferret it out, and insist on interfering at the eleventh hour. The entire business would then have to be begun over again. But do persuade her to show herself at the ceremony of distribution; otherwise, it will be seen that she really begrudges the gifts."

Eugenia did not look very hopeful on that score.

"After all," the Vicar said, as if a sudden thought had struck him, "it really does not much matter. Let her stay in bed till the dreadful transaction is over. Let her do exactly as she pleases. Indeed, my errand now was with yourself rather than with her. What I wanted to say was this: you are virtually the lady of the house; you are the real mistress here. You hinted the other day at something in the shape of an entertainment to close up the proceedings."

"Mrs. De Robert should surely show her relations a little hospitality before final departure," Eugenia said.

"By all means! I quite approve of the notion. Make your own arrangements, then, and I will do my best to help you," the Vicar replied cheerfully and pleasantly.

These repeated interviews with Eugenia might result in nothing, but they made him feel cheerful and pleasant at the time. Her friendliness was perhaps no more meant especially for him than the sunshine; for all that, like the sunshine, it warmed his heart.

As usual, he had a little passage of arms with her before parting.

"You might do worse than turn yourself into a hospital nurse," he said, looking at the white bib apron. "Such an example would prove contagious. You would thus become heroic vicariously, as well as in the fact."

She laid aside her apron somewhat sadly. The sarcasm jarred.

"I suppose I am like a good many other women," she replied: "I would be heroic if I could."

He also became suddenly serious.

"You cannot say that you have no chances in that line," he said, for the life of him unable to keep silent. "What truer heroism than to sacrifice one's own happiness for that of another! Such an opportunity, at least, is yours."

## CHAPTER XXX.

### DIPLOMACY.

IT may readily be supposed that the police-escorted van exhilarated all concerned but Mrs. De Robert. Sabina's gentle hopes, Prue's meek anticipations, were outdone by the enthusiasm of their partners in good fortune. The behaviour of the good priest was consistent. Having made up his mind to obtain possession of the Murillo and a certain pair of branched silver candlesticks he had heard of, he quietly set to work to talk Mr. Meridian over. Every day for the space of a week he paid a little visit to the Vicarage in order to continue negotiations. The discussion began and ended with the Murillo and the silver candlesticks, no other topics appearing of sufficient importance to be even mooted. To compare small things with great, those daily conversations were like the historic wrangle of Thiers and Bismarck over Strasburg and Metz. Which of the two would win his cause? What would be the fate of Strasburg and Metz—in other words, of the Murillo and the silver candlesticks?

The Vicar was a deep man, and more than a match for the most Jesuitical Jesuit going. There was, indeed, a considerable leaven of the Jesuit in his composition. It was not in the least difficult for him to conceal his thoughts, except when with the distracting Miss Ivory, and over his tongue, also, he exercised easy sway. If he did not wish to disclose any especial

fact, no one on earth could make him disclose it. Thus the reverend father was always received in the most cordial, conciliatory spirit, and always heard with extreme deference; but he never got an inch nearer the truth.

So instructive were the long talks on Spanish art that Mr. Meridian ought to have admitted the more artistic of his parishioners to hear them. He was himself a man of wide reading, also a traveller; in this especial field neither knowledge nor experience could bear comparison with those of his visitor. He had never set foot on Spanish soil; and who can speak authoritatively of Murillo without a journey to Seville?

The priest was fresh from a residence in Spain. He had every particular concerning the Spanish master—bibliographical, historic, statistical—at his fingers' ends, so that his discourses abounded with knowledge. Very dexterously and plausibly he allowed the main point—in other words, the ultimate fate of Mrs. De Robert's great canvas—to remain wholly in the background. In glowing terms he descanted upon the characteristics of the painter, the merits of this masterpiece and that; in fine, spoke so learnedly and feelingly that Mr. Meridian or any one else interested in the subject could have listened to him all day long. The perusal of a dozen works on art in general, or on Murillo in particular, would not have instructed him in anything like the same degree. Then he brought prints and photographs to help out his descriptions, till Seville and its pictorial treasures seemed to rise before the listener. Touchingly insinuating, too, he would recall laborious days spent by himself under the warm Andalusian heavens; dwell upon the consolations

that beauty, alike natural and ideal, had afforded; and with tears in his eyes describe some especial mood of religious fervour, when, kneeling in rapt ecstasy at the foot of a Murillo, heaven itself had seemed to open to his vision.

“I assure you, my dear sir,” he said one day, after an unusually long and agreeable sitting, “the deep interest I take in this family heirloom, and the positive rapture with which the bare possibility of possessing it fills my heart. are beyond my power to describe. Possessing it, did I say? You and I, priest and priest, may well disclaim motives that do no dishonour to other men. We covet, but not for ourselves, not for earthly children, living testimonies of fireside love and joy; instead, for those helpless and nameless ones who may be classed under one general head—the orphanhood of humanity. You are at one with me here, and, indeed, on how many other vital questions! The partition wall that divides us is thin indeed! You can realise the ardent, nay, painful, craving I feel for this treasure; yet, after all, what matters its destination, provided it adorns some building consecrated to God; provided it brings the callous to their knees, the carnal-minded to penitence! Never was enthusiasm more needed; never genius more in request as a ministrant of religion than in these days. I beseech you, therefore, whatever you do, let not the Murillo fall into worldly hands; let it not furnish vain gratification to the sensual and the self-indulgent, prove one drop more in the cup already brimful of luxury and mammon!”

This eloquent appeal, like the rest of its predecessors, left the matter very much where it was; and, at the close of the seven-days' parley, the discouraged



father felt no surer of obtaining his object than at the beginning. It really seemed to him that Mr. Meridian wanted the Murillo and the candlesticks for himself. Such might reasonably be the case, supposing a claim of kinship could be put in. The Vicar of Hopedale was inclined to High-Church doctrines; candles had appeared long ago on the altars of neighbouring churches: any Sunday the same innovation might greet the eye of Hopedale folk.

Nevertheless, the priest did not relax his efforts. The visits went on; the parleyings went on; and, but for the decisive day at hand, it seemed as if they might go on for ever.

The other claimants held modestly aloof, Mr. Meridian being wholly unmolested as far as the quartette were concerned. Truth to tell, the whole affair now wore a different aspect in the eyes of nephew and uncle. It was less the much-dreamed-of heritage they aspired after than the hand of the incomparable Miss Ivory. Unselfish here, as under all other circumstances and conditions, the elder Derrober entered heart and soul into the feelings of the younger. Material interests were merged in questions of far deeper import, or only dwelt upon as they might affect them. Would Miss Ivory dream for a moment of accepting a man who had nothing but himself to offer? The two discussed the subject as untiringly as the father and Mr. Meridian had talked over the Murillo and the silver candlesticks.

It was highly characteristic of the pair that they should thus for the hundredth time in life lose sight of worldly aggrandisement, shut their eyes to the something they might hear of to their advantage.

Whilst the reverend father insinuated, harangued, coaxed, and the ladies laid bare their circumstances in every particular, these two remained proudly reticent. Like Jason, they had come in search of the Golden Fleece; but, having come, were at no pains to slay the dragon. Even their schemes for the remodelling of society were now in abeyance, the phalanstery eclipsed, the Golden Age lying before us forgotten.

"I'll tell you what, nephew," said Mr. Derrober, with a look of conscious sagacity, much as if he considered himself the personification of worldly wisdom—just indeed what he was not. "I'll tell you the long and the short of it, my boy. There is but one way for an honest man to deal with a true woman—speak out."

The Doctor, who possessed plenty of wisdom, but rather that of Rabelais than of Poor Richard, pondered before making reply. When he did speak, it was hardly to cut the Gordian knot.

"My respected uncle," he said, arching his eyebrows, "do tell me, are you a prehistoric lake-dweller come to life again, or a vivified citizen of the Age of Bronze? You speak like these. Don't you know that the woman of the olden time is a survival—a heroine obsolete as Lot's wife? The course you propose might have answered when the world was in its bib and pinafore; but times have changed since then, and women too. The nineteenth-century paragon is a very complex creature, no more to be compared to her forerunner than the vertebrate to the jelly-fish."

"Miss Ivory is not a bit of a blue-stocking," replied the other comfortably.

"Oh, as if algorithms and the Greek particle had anything to do with it! Aptitudes and superiorities

are born with us, in the blood. We suck 'em in with mother's milk."

"But you are a man of no mean parts, Frank. You have as much knowledge and experience as most of your fellows. No woman need be ashamed of you when you open your lips, I am sure!"

The Doctor shook his head.

"My good sir, just put my parts in the scales with Miss Ivory's aspirations, and see which would kick the beam. I feel sure of it: a girl of her spirit and character has horizons wide as those of an Alpine panorama. Nothing short of a career would satisfy her."

"When did honest, faithful love fail to satisfy a woman?" said the elder.

"Back to the cave you issued from, with your flint carving-knives and mammoth-bones! My respected uncle, you are a hundred—hundreds of years behind your time. Don't you know that love, as you call it, is as completely out of date as troubadours and court fools? Instead of seeking leafy solitudes and haunts of the nightingale, lovers nowadays solve algebraic problems in company, or get up statistics of crime by way of courtship. This finished creature wants worthy surroundings. The frame must match the picture. She should marry a man of means."

"She has, doubtless, an ample fortune of her own," said the elder, after a pause. "And you are pretty sure to get something from our kinswoman. Women are very generous when they have once given their affections. And"—here he hesitated, and got out, with much feeling and a touch of sadness—"if, indeed, things turn out well for you, my lad, we will let other considerations go, and leave the betterment of the

world to your children. What's mine is yours, you know. 'Tis little enough an old fellow like myself wants when once he parts company with schemes for benefiting humanity."

The Doctor might have passed for a man without feelings, so skilfully did he conceal them now. The eyes of the other, however, filled with tears as he replied, for he knew well that the words came from the depth of his heart.

"Tush, tush!" he said; "you ought to be ashamed of yourself to put such base thoughts into my head. Why, to deprive you of pocket-money for turning the world topsy-turvy would be about as inhuman as to bury you alive. No, old curmudgeon! you shall ride your hobby-horses like a prince yet; and I'll ride with you when this last has kicked me off. It may not be written in the stars that Miss Ivory is to marry the Hon. and Rev. Mr. Meridian, and in due time become a bishop's lady; but she will never marry Frank Derrober, that's positive."

"Not unless Frank Derrober asks her," said the other gently.

"Now, sir, did you ever ask a woman, and get a refusal? Answer me!"

"I have gone through an ordeal more painful still. I have been asked by a noble woman, and had to refuse her."

"Why could you not accept?" asked the Doctor, evidently pondering on the matter. The reply came after some hesitation.

"She was rich. I had not a dollar to call my own. I felt that I should be weighed down by a sense of perpetual obligation."

"Humph! the moral is *à propos*," the Doctor said drily.

"By no means! My case differed essentially from your own. I was not in love."

"Well," replied the other more cheerfully, "we'll see. I may feel quite differently this day se'nnight. Five thousand pounds before now have worked miracles. Ten have all but made the sun stand still. Twenty might turn me into a proper gentleman, a presentable character. And mighty pleasant such a condition of expectancy! But for glorious hopes like these, soap-bubbles that burst, who would give a jackstraw for this paltry life!"

With that philosophic reflection, the Doctor left off talking about Miss Ivory, which was not quite the same thing as to leave off thinking about her. That would indeed have been difficult just now. Every day they met, and every day under circumstances that rendered her more adorable. Eugenia was, indeed, doing her utmost to atone for Mrs. De Robert's unfriendly attitude. Perhaps grave doubts assailed her as to the final issue of this business.

She could never feel quite sure of her old friend when it came to a crisis. So, as the Doctor's behaviour was circumspection itself, after the half-confession of a few days back, and as his conversation was livelier and more engaging than ever, she performed her duties of hostess, and yielded freely to the charm.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### MRS. DE ROBERT'S HOBGOBLINS.

AS the eventful day drew near, Mrs. De Robert's illness took an aggravated form. She certainly did not as yet refuse nourishment, or manifest any of those grave symptoms that alarm anxious relations. Her condition, whilst not dangerous, was nevertheless as bad as well could be. Miss Ivory, serenity itself, betrayed nothing in the sick-room, but out of it could not conceal her uneasiness. What if at the eleventh hour a stop should be put to all proceedings? What if, after all, the unhappy questors after something to their advantage should be sent away empty-handed and resentful? Hitherto she had scouted such a notion when suggested to her by the Vicar. Now she felt obliged to acknowledge the same ground for apprehension; and the provoking part of the business was that Mr. Meridian seemed to have turned round. He would go his own way, turning a deaf ear to her misgivings.

Was it—no, she would not, could not, believe this of Mr. Meridian, yet the question would arise—was it that he was thus pursuing his way bent on mischief? Long ago he had foretold a dismal *fiasco* to the little drama. Was he well pleased to have his words made good? The next moment she reproached herself for the unworthy suspicion. He was outwardly cold, a trifle hard, and given to self-estimation; he was, for all that,

incapable of double-dealing. She felt it, nevertheless, her duty to warn him.

"If Mrs. De Robert refuses to divide the property amongst her friends, I shall feel I ought to give them mine!" she said, with heightened colour, and almost with tears of vexation. "Think of the distance they have come, the hopes they have been allowed to cherish for so long, the boon, too, that anything in the shape of fortune would be to all!"

He looked at her with an odd provocative smile. Was not this attitude of a piece with the inconsequence of womankind? Hitherto, who so confident as herself, who so deaf to his hints of a catastrophe? Now, he supposed, just out of contrariety and from a spirit of contradiction, she was ready to cry with dismay.

"You shall be under no necessity of bestowing your fortune—" ("even upon the epigrammatic Doctor," was on his lips); he refrained, and added, "whatever you may do of your own free-will. I flatter myself my strategy is more than a match for our old friend's temper. Besides, she has virtually handed over the property in trust to me. Am I likely to surrender it?"

Miss Ivory did not look reassured.

He went on, still quite confident:

"For diseases like this, we must have recourse to drastic remedies. She has laid upon me a duty; that duty I shall discharge, no matter what obstacles she may put in my way."

"It is not so much the money that her mind harps upon," Eugenia said, still unconvinced and uneasy: "she has enough and to spare of her own; but I am sorry she ever promised to transfer her family heirlooms during her lifetime. She seems to cling to them now."

"She cannot very well carry them to that paradise in Central Africa you intend to visit—to Bongo!" Mr. Meridian said jestingly. "You would both certainly be murdered for sake of the spoil—which, by the way, I wonder you are not here. Does not the thought of harbouring so much treasure prevent you from sleeping?"

Eugenia was ruffled and vexed. The Vicar's banter jarred just then.

"I wish I had nothing else to keep me awake," she answered with pique. "However, as you can move mountains and cause rivers to flow backwards, I ought to feel ashamed of myself for being uneasy at all. So I may cast my fears to the winds. To-morrow you will conjure Mrs. De Robert out of bed, put her in the best possible humour, and dismiss the claimants, one and all, enriched and delighted?"

"Yes, I think I can promise you so much," he replied coolly. "I fear yours is but an uncomfortable time of it in our old friend's room. This perpetual hankering after the impossible must try your nerves!" and he looked at her kindly and anxiously.

"I know Mrs. De Robert too well to take her humours to heart," Eugenia answered; "and it is ever other people she finds fault with, not myself."

"That is an element of comfort, certainly. I dare say I come in for my full share of abuse. However, Mrs. De Robert and I understand each other pretty well by this time; and, let her say what she will, we are fast friends at bottom. Well, present my gift, and say I hope she will be feeling well enough to join us in the morning."

Mr. Meridian had brought the invalid some luscious



figs, the choicest product of his garden. Daintily cradled in leaves, and placed in a pretty rustic basket, the offering looked the most appetising imaginable.

"Only look at what Mr. Meridian has sent you!" Eugenia said cheerfully, as she entered the sick-room basket in hand. "Did you ever behold more delicious figs!"

Mrs. De Robert sat up in bed and eyed the Vicar's offering with ill-concealed satisfaction. She was bound to feel displeased at everything, but she adored green figs.

"Humph!" she said. "'Tis a pity he didn't put a viper inside. 'Twould have come in handy, for I feel just ready to make away with myself."

"You will eat a fig, nevertheless?" said Eugenia, as she picked out the largest and ripest.

"O Ivey! Ivey!" cried Mrs. De Robert, "what an arrant fool I have been! If you could see the fruit-basket of frosted silver packed up in one of these cases, you would feel, like me, ready to cry your eyes out. 'Tis a little gem, so chaste, so elegant, you would see nothing prettier on her Majesty's table."

"Never mind, Roberta! we will buy some antique silver, you and I, between us. And just think of the pleasure of having and using what is our very own!"

"I am mighty glad I told Affie I should keep the things on the sideboard—the tea-service and snuffers," Mrs. De Robert went on maliciously. "I shall keep a thing or two more, in spite of Mr. Meridian. See if I don't! He is not going to have it all his own way this time."

She took another morsel of her fig, and continued almost in a whisper:

"'Tis all very well to prate about death-bed promises and the like. But whatever I promised my poor darling—ah! one must die to be a darling! I am always saying that—whatever I promised my poor darling, nothing was said as to time. I was free to use the things and enjoy the things as long as I pleased. What he cared about was that one of his family should possess them ultimately. Now, Eugenio, I'm not going to be unhandsome; I am not going to distribute soup-tickets, and then turn a host of starving creatures from my door. Oh no! I'll be square, as true as my name is Sarah Roberts! But just put your ear down, Ivey. I really can't part with the things in the cases yet—the Murilly and the silver basket, and such like. It makes me bad to think of it. I shall just stay patiently in my bed till I hear the carpenters at work below, and then I shall go downstairs and plump myself on the first case they attempt to meddle with; and that's what I mean to do, and no one on earth shall prevent me!"

Miss Ivory said nothing, but her look discommended. The bare notion of such a scandal shocked her inexpressibly. The scene rose before her mind's eye: Mr. Meridian presiding, the happy claimants blissful and expectant; and rushing into their midst, dashing all hopes to the ground, the wild figure of Mrs. De Robert, in dressing-gown and nightcap. She was capable of carrying out her threat, and something more.

"You have never seen the things, or you would feel as I do," Mrs. De Robert went on insinuatingly. "It would take me a week to describe 'em. You see, they are not all family belongings. My poor Affie had a craze for Apostle spoons and George the Third teapots; and whatever he could lay hands on he marked with the

*fleur de lis*. 'Tis all of a piece, he would say; and, so long as it has belonged to one of the name, 'twill answer the same purpose as if it had descended from generation to generation. Oh, why did he not marry me when I was a younger woman! I've no fondness for babies, nasty squalling brats!—poor dear innocents! But you know what I mean. Had poor Affie had a child of his own, all this botheration would have been spared me. I might have enjoyed the things in peace."

"Well," Eugenia said cheerfully, "as you cannot enjoy them in peace, it will be much better to have them out of your sight."

"But to think that the Murilly and the silver candlesticks will go to the Pope and the Inquisition, as I am sure they will! Mr. Meridian is mum; and, when he chooses to be mum, you might as well shake an empty sack, expecting potatoes to drop out, as try to get a scrap of information from him. He's a Jesuit in disguise himself, I'll be bound. That's what all our clergy are coming to. Then to think of those Mormons! Next to a thumb-screwing Jesuit, I do think the person I most detest is a man with seven wives."

"Nay," Miss Ivory remonstrated very justly: "it seems that neither of these gentlemen possesses one wife, much less seven."

"Oh, what won't men say to make their story good! There is something wrong about them, or they would never have crossed the Atlantic on such an errand. If not Mormons, be sure they are Fenians in disguise, sent over to assassinate the Queen, or blow up the House of Commons. They have a mighty evil look, I can tell you; and we may say what we like, but it's not genteel

to be poor—never was! Hark! was not that a carpenter's tap?"

"It is only the cook undoing a case of wine. We had none in the house, so I ordered some."

"Are you quite sure?" Mrs. De Robert said, sitting up in her bed and listening attentively.

"Quite positive. Indeed, Mr. Meridian has the key of the lumber-room with him at the Vicarage."

That answer seemed to reassure the patient. She settled herself once more comfortably on her pillows.

"The sound of a hammer on those cases would be as bad as if I heard nails being driven into my own coffin," she said. "Worse, I do think! But when to-morrow comes, you will see, I shall do as I say. I'm not going to have poor dear Affie's silver made into graven images for papists to worship, nor pay the expenses of a second gunpowder plot. As to the two harmless old maids, I bear them no malice. They are as good as myself, and a trifle better, I daresay. Mr. Meridian may give them just whatever he pleases. But it is of no use. Their names will die with them. Like me, they are but a couple of leafless boughs. Humph! these figs are first-rate. The Vicar is vastly civil on a sudden!"

Meantime, all was bustle and preparation in the lower regions of the Manor House. Not only was wine being unpacked, but preparations for the more substantial part of the banquet were carried on with the greatest possible alacrity. Here Miss Ivory determined there should be no disenchantment. However disastrously Mrs. De Robert might interfere with the rest of the programme, her reputation for hospitality should not be allowed to suffer.

Like all girls of spirit, Miss Ivory delighted in flutter

and excitement. No sooner was Mrs. De Robert in a comfortable drowse than she flew to the pantry or the kitchen, donned her housekeeping apron, and was forthwith immersed in business. With the utmost relish, she lent a helping hand to this one and that. Now she aided Lucy, the housemaid, to rub up glass and china; now she whisked up syllabub or strained jelly; and all with a light-heartedness and ease that made such an auxiliary delightful to the servants.

"O Sarah!" she said to the homely north-country woman who officiated as cook, "how pleasant to have the house for once turned upside down! Why do people lead such dull, monotonous lives, when they might be bustling about like show-folks getting ready for the fair?"

"Miss, as if I could answer such a question as that! You must go to the Scriptures," was Sarah's cautious reply.

"Will the syllabubs be just perfection, think you?" again asked the young lady.

"Sure, miss, that is a bit riddlesome too. We does our best; but in small things, as well as great, the Lord rideth the whirlwind."

"You mean that a thunder-storm to-night might turn the syllabubs?" asked Miss Ivory anxiously.

"Lord, miss! That is what I ought to have meant, of course. But those who quote Scripture have said their say."

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### MRS. DE ROBERT'S VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY.

MRS. DE ROBERT'S sleep was broken and uneasy that night. Again and again she woke up, haunted by the sound of imaginary hammers. Another kind of nightmare that tormented her was a visionary encounter with the Vicar and the claimants. He had laid violent hands on the Murilly, the Jesuit aided and abetted, the Americans harangued, the ladies wept, and all was direst commotion. As soon as day began to break, she stole noiselessly out of bed, watched, and listened. All was hushed and silent. Evidently not a soul stirred. Miss Ivory slept in the next room, and not for worlds would she disturb her; but this suspense could be endured no longer.

Mrs. De Robert wanted to forestall Mr. Meridian, and also curiosity burned within her as to what that clever Eugenia had been about during the last few days. She knew that nothing delighted Ivey so much as to turn the house topsy-turvy when she had a chance, and she felt sure that the delightful process had just been carried out with a vengeance. So in nightcap and dressing-gown, tiptoe with expectation, Mrs. De Robert set forth on her prowl.

Hardly out of her bedroom, she stood still, dumfounded. The landing-place was transformed as if by magic: tropical plants and flowers filled the large bay-windows; the well-worn stair-carpet was replaced by bright crimson baize; at intervals were placed baskets

of ferns and begonias, whilst waxlights in abundance occupied temporary brackets on the walls.

Mrs. De Robert made an odd grimace, divining Eugenia's little plot in a moment. The monkey! thought Mrs. De Robert, she has invited the neighbours to a dance!

She continued her survey, sniffing surprise as she went. True enough, the drawing-room had been cleared for dancing, and was as festive as wreaths and garlands could make it. In the dining-room, preparations were far advanced for the supper. Two long tables, covered with finest damask, showed a glittering display of plate and crystal. Only the cut flowers and the regales were as yet wanting.

"Humph!" said Mrs. De Robert to herself. "'Tis mighty clever of Ivey to make everything look so nice, I must say that; and now let us see what she is going to give her visitors to eat!"

She paused and listened. All remained still as before. Not a soul was astir. Then, confidently, and with a look of extreme relish, she made her way to Eugenia's pantry. Here, indeed, was a sight to awaken enthusiasm in the mind of the least epicurean; but Mrs. De Robert had an uncommon liking for ball-room cates. Raised pies, whip-syllabubs, and strawberry-creams ever put her in good temper.

When she glanced round at the tempting array of dishes, she quite forgot the mental disturbance of the last few days, as well as the nightmare from which she had just awakened, and complacently sat down to a little meal. The confinement to her room had ended in giving an appetite. She could, perhaps, have eaten everyday fare in bed, had she tried; but she ever put

a check upon hunger during these attacks—broths and gruel seemed more in accordance with the fitness of things.

The revulsion of feeling now brought about, her amusement at the scale of Eugenia's preparations, above all the sight of a certain favorite dish, made her feel positively famished. Having once more listened and assured herself that she was quite safe from observation, she whipped up a spoon and with infinite relish attacked a dish of French flummery.

"Jenny will wonder what thief has been in her pantry," she thought, chuckling over the escapade. "Well," smacking her lips, "there is plenty for folks to eat without the French flummery. 'Tis mighty good, I must say; just as we used to make it at home fifty years ago! Dear, how hungry I am, to be sure! I wonder if I can lay my hands on anything in the bread or biscuit way!"

She looked about and succeeded in finding some old-fashioned home-made rusks that tasted uncommonly good with the flummery. Nothing, indeed, could be better; but now she must have something to drink as well.

"Lemonade—no, that's cold for this hour of the day! Humph! here's a little wine in a bottle; half a glass of Madeira won't hurt me, I'll be bound. But I believe that is Sarah lumbering overhead. I must be quick, or I shall be caught."

Having by this time made an excellent meal, she drank her half-glass of Madeira—very warm and comforting it seemed under the circumstances—then hastened back to bed.

The retreat was effected just in time. A few minutes later Sarah, the cook, descended, however, to go into



the pantry and discover the depredations—her business was in the dairy; no one else would be downstairs for another hour to come.

Mrs. De Robert felt a wholly different creature when once more she laid her head on the pillow. The feverish discontent, the tormenting restlessness, alike the physical and mental discomfort from which she had lately suffered, now passed away. She felt soothed, refreshed, delightfully drowsy. In less than a quarter of an hour she was in a profound sleep, from which no carpenter's hammer downstairs would have aroused her.

When at last she awoke, it was wellnigh noon. She sat up, looked round, and listened. In spite of curtains and shutters, it was clear that she had slept a very long time; in fact, that the day was already far advanced. Then the adventures of the night came back to her recollection, one by one: the tossing on a sleepless pillow, the nightmare, the surreptitious descent and discoveries made on the way; finally, that excellent little refection in the pantry.

She felt wonderfully alert, and keenly alive to the excitement of the hour. The house was very silent—unnaturally so, she thought, for that time of the day. What could everybody be about? Mrs. De Robert loved mystification. She liked to surprise, and, although she would not for worlds have confessed it, she liked to be surprised in turn. The thing done, she rarely found fault with. The thing people proposed to do was always, in her eyes, as bad as possible.

What could be going on now? Then, all at once, her old jealousy concerning the heirlooms came back. The carpenters had surely been at work while she slept. Mr. Meridian must be displaying her treasures to the

assembled household; worse still, he was giving them away to the Pope, the Inquisition, and the men with seven wives apiece.

The thought was maddening. These good folks should have their money, and welcome; but they should not have the Murilly, and the plate, and the jewels—no, not if her name was Sarah Roberts! Performing a makeshift toilet, as she had done a few hours before, she again went downstairs, peeping and listening by the way.

The dancing-room was deserted. The banquet-hall, as the drawing-room now deserved to be called, was empty also. Yet, as she advanced one step at a time, all her senses alive, she heard the well-known voice of Mr. Meridian. The sound proceeded from the breakfast-parlour, a small room opening on to the garden. Noiselessly and warily she approached the door, noting various facts by the way. On the hall-table lay several hats—the felt head-gear of the Vicar and the priest, the straw hats of the Americans; she also observed some parasols, the property of Selina Beckett and Patience Purfle.

She gathered that the day's business had begun—the distribution was already taking place. Irritated at the bare thought of the business that had brought these visitors together, repenting more bitterly than before that she had ever decided to part with the property, feeling vindictive towards every one of those who had come forward to claim it, she was yet too much of a humourist not to relish the situation.

Mr. Meridian occupied a chair by the table, on which lay various papers and memorandum-books. On either side sat the claimants, motionless as statues, suspense of a pleasurable kind written on every face.

There was pathos mingled with comedy in such a scene. Sabina and Prue had evidently been shedding tears of alternate hope and fear. They had taken off their bonnets, which they twirled nervously on their laps; and both sat looking at Mr. Meridian almost as intently as prisoners gaze at their judge when brought up for sentence. Now they were red, now pale; depressed one moment, the next elated with ecstatic anticipation.

"Pray let us both expect the worst," Sabina had said before setting out. "As my Edwin used to say—his words are engraven on my memory—'Bina,' he said, 'if you want to keep your mind in just equilibrium, always wake up expecting the direst calamities that can afflict humanity—the bank to break which holds your little all, a good-for-nothing relation with nine children to take up his abode with you, Asiatic cholera to break out next door, or your own house to be burnt to the ground. These things, most likely, won't all happen at once; but, by dwelling on the possibility of such catastrophes, we give the mind a healthy tone.'"

Opposite the pair sat the three men, the place of honour next to Mr. Meridian being occupied by the priest. He also testified the liveliest interest in the proceedings, interest by no means of impersonal kind. He drew out his pocket-handkerchief and replaced it, hemmed and ha'd uneasily, bit his lips from time to time, and glanced anxiously at the unreadable face of the umpire.

But the most curious study was that afforded by the physiognomies of the uncle and nephew. Whilst the elder Derrober behaved with impulsiveness, showing even more discomposure than the ladies and the priest, the Doctor sat with head erect and folded arms, the

very personification of stoical indifference. A shipwrecked mariner in mid-ocean, straining his eyes after some friendly sail, could hardly wear an intenser look than did the uncle. The nephew, on the contrary, was the personification of coolness, except when he glanced at the white-robed figure of Miss Ivory. Eugenia, dressed in muslin, as befitted the season, sat a little removed from the group by the table. Wonderful to relate, her fingers were busy; she had beside her a basket of flowers, and was arranging them in bunches as she listened. No wonder that Dr. Derrober glanced that way! The slender, erect figure, the beautifully-shaped head, the dark bright hair, and fair face so hard to read, made a picture enchanting enough to distract the attention of expectant next of kin.

Mr. Meridian looked much as he ever did—circumspect, collected, entirely master of himself and the situation. Something must have happened, thought the peeper at the door. He was evidently about to make an unexpected disclosure. As he manipulated his papers and paused in his preamble, nothing could be clearer than that he had surprises of some kind or another for his little audience. To Mrs. De Robert, spying at the keyhole, the moment was as crucial as to the breathlessly-expectant claimants. If they were eager to obtain possession of her treasures, still more eager was she to keep them for herself. Agape they all were, she knew well enough, for the Murilly, and the plate, and the jewels; but for a brief interval, and by anticipation only, was the joy of possession to be theirs. How would they look when she broke in upon them like a thunderclap, and said her say?

She still paused at the keyhole, anxious to learn

what Mr. Meridian's preamble was all about. Preamble it evidently was; no one as yet knew anything. Expectancy had reached its acme, breathless suspense was at its height.

Calmly and deliberately, as if he were publishing the banns of marriage for half a dozen couples at church, the Vicar thus delivered himself:

"You have now the preliminary facts before you. No legacy is here in question, as you have seen. The distribution of property is entirely a voluntary act on the part of Mrs. De Robert—an act made in accordance with the wishes of her late husband. It was his desire that, in case her own circumstances should so far alter in the future as to permit the sacrifice, she should seek out next of kin bearing his name, and hand over to them the money and family heirlooms, or as much of them as she felt ready to part with. Mrs. De Robert having intrusted me with the business from the beginning, I have endeavoured to act judiciously and impartially, and, I hope and believe, to the satisfaction of all concerned. I have now, however, to inform you that the delicate matter thus confided to me by my old friend has been simplified in an untoward, a mysterious, a most extraordinary manner."

He glanced from one to the other of the little group, and got out, in the same crisp, measured tones:

"To my great regret, I have now to make known to you that the cases so carefully guarded, the cases to which no one here has had access but myself, are found to contain nothing but lumber. The family heirlooms of which you have all heard so much—the works of art, the plate, and the jewels—have all vanished as completely as if the earth had swallowed them up!"

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### THE SECOND BOMBSHELL FALLS.

MRS. DE ROBERT had heard more than enough. The piece of intelligence, awful to the expectant heirs as a thunder-clap, came welcome to her as a summer gale. It did more than relieve her of a grievous burden: it put her in the best possible humour, and made her feel years younger.

At first she could hardly believe in such a piece of good fortune. All difficulties in the way of a pacific settlement were now removed. She was relieved from the disagreeable duty of being churlish at the last moment. There would now be no squabbling over the treasure. It was gone, and a mighty good riddance too! The thumb-screwing Jesuit, the men with seven wives apiece, the cheese-paring old maids might cry their eyes out to no purpose. The Murilly was providentially rescued from the Pope, the Inquisition; the fruit-basket of solid silver would not be melted down by dynamiters sworn to blow up the House of Commons; the jewels—well, they might be put to good or bad uses, it was no longer any business of hers. Anyhow, there was an end of them as far as she was concerned.

She forgot her nondescript toilet, for toilet it was, in spite of the nightcap. She was neither shoeless nor stockingless. Her dressing-gown of bright-flowered stuff might pass muster for a dress. Her cap was

ornamented with lace frills and a lavender bow. For that hour of the day, and in her own house, she presented a very creditable appearance.

Indifferent to these considerations, she now broke in upon the thunder-stricken company. Hard as it was to these much-tried claimants to have the treasure wrenched from them at the last moment, it was harder still to lose the money. This terrible apparition in the nightcap could surely mean nothing else. The arbitress of Fate had changed her mind. One and all were to be sent away empty-handed as they had come. This something to their advantage had proved a mere will-o'-the-wisp—an *ignis fatuus* luring to despair.

The lookers-on were characteristically affected. Miss Ivory, really frightened, rose from her seat with a little cry; her first thought being that Mrs. De Robert was either walking in her sleep or a prey to mental hallucination. The epigrammatic Doctor, a moment before so apathetic, flew up like a Jack-in-a-box, and, careless of appearances, got behind Miss Ivory for protection and shelter.

Mr. Derrober raised his hands to heaven, as if entreating Divine pity under some cataclysmal visitation.

The priest whipped out breviary and beads, and mumbled Paternosters as fast as his tongue could go.

As to Sabina and Prue, they sat pale as ghosts, holding each other's hands and trembling from head to foot. They were like a pair of travellers surprised by a railway accident, every moment expecting the very worst.

Only Mr. Meridian maintained composure. He certainly did not look as if the little incident pleased him—quite the contrary. He was evidently much disturbed, but no more scared at Mrs. De Robert's unex-

pected appearance than if a wasp had alighted on his nose.

"An unexpected pleasure!" he said, smiling satirically as he handed her a chair. "Good-morning, Mrs. De Robert! I hope I see you well!"

"Good-day to you!—and to you, sir!—and you, ma'am!" Mrs. De Robert said, with the utmost affability, making the tour of the room, and giving her hand to each of the claimants by turn. "Well, Jenny, here I am; but pray don't let me interrupt. Pray go on!" she added, addressing herself to Mr. Meridian; "I heard what you were just saying about the Murilly, and the plate, and the rest."

She glanced benignantly from one to the other of the crestfallen little audience.

"What can't be cured must be endured," she added airily. "I am sure you were all welcome enough to the rubbish. However, 'tis gone; and there's an end of it. We shall not any of us, I'll be bound, live an hour the less in consequence."

She sat down beside Eugenia, Mr. Meridian observing her with an odd expression. Her whimsical behaviour did not seem to take him very much by surprise. The rest of the company regained composure by degrees. The Doctor emerged from his hiding-place behind Miss Ivory, patted his uncle encouragingly on the shoulder, whispering, "All right, old fellow!" Sabina and Prue grew mildly cheerful by degrees, as folks on their way home from a funeral. The priest put away beads and breviary. Order and composure being perfectly restored, Mr. Meridian cleared his voice to begin again, keeping a sharp look-out on Mrs. De Robert all the time. In fact, he behaved much as a lion-tamer, who,



while going through the day's performance, never once dares to take his eyes off some dangerous old animal.

"I've been the round of your pantry," whispered Mrs. De Robert to Eugenia, "and tasted your flummery too. How good!" and she smacked her lips.

Eugenia smiled reprovingly. Mr. Meridian called to order in quick, rasping tones:

"Permit me to go on, Mrs. De Robert."

"Pray go on," she said; "I am sure that is just what I want you to do. You were saying——"

"The family heirlooms, then, of which I hold a carefully-made-out list in my hands, are unfortunately no longer in question—that is to say, not in question for the moment. It is to be hoped that we shall recover at least a portion of the missing property. The usual steps to that effect will of course be taken, and no exertions spared. Meantime, allow me to state that I had endeavoured to apportion these objects impartially, and with a view to the special tastes and requirements of the recipients. The gem of the collection, the Murillo——"

"What is the good of making people's mouths water for nothing?" broke in Mrs. De Robert. "Much good it does to tell any one you have given him something which is no longer yours to give!"

"Permit me," Mr. Meridian said severely. "This beautiful work of art—a Holy Family, by one of the greatest religious painters the world has ever known—was, without doubt, originally designed for a church. With what seems almost providential appropriateness, the Church sent one of its ministers to claim it. The Murillo, then—I feel sure with the sanction of all

present—I had set aside for the reverend father now amongst us.”

“I’d sooner see it burnt to tinder!” whispered Mrs. De Robert audibly.

The priest bowed melancholy acknowledgment. Mr. Meridian continued in the same inflexible tone:

“By whom it was to have graced some sacred edifice in a region but yesterday converted to civilisation and Christianity.”

“Pretty Christianity that!” again Mrs. De Robert whispered audibly—“the Inquisition, the rack, burnings in Smithfield, and the rest of it!”

“Will you permit me to continue?” asked Mr. Meridian, severer than before.

“I’m all attention,” Mrs. De Robert replied with affected meekness, the next moment whispering in Eugenia’s ear: “’Twas the Jesuits that made Galileo swear the world didn’t turn round; I know all about it.”

“Next in interest and value to this *chef-d’œuvre* of Spanish art came the armour,” Mr. Meridian proceeded. “The collection contained some admirable specimens. After a good deal of deliberation, I felt it to be my duty to hand over those antiquities to our visitors from the New World.”

“Hear, hear!” cried the Doctor.

“It seemed to me, to say the least of it, as fitting an allotment as the first,” resumed Mr. Meridian. “If an altar-piece painted by Murillo seemed a suitable donation to a Polynesian cathedral, no less so were a suit of armour worn at Crecy or Poitiers to the museum of some infant city of the Far West.”

“Fiddle-de-dee!” murmured Mrs. De Robert. “Haven’t the Yankées got Red Indians and other an-

tiquities of their own? And give me a good boiler or block-tin roasting-jack for all the armour in the world, I say!"

Mr. Meridian glanced sternly at his unruly client and continued:

"I next had to dispose of the plate, old china, and jewellery; and here lay my greatest difficulty. The late Mr. De Robert desired—and very naturally, as it seemed to me—that the lion's share of his property should go to a male heir, some father of a family; in other words, he hoped that a claimant might come forward by whom the race and name would in all probability be continued. Such has not been the case. Our visitors one and all are celibates——"

"If that isn't enough to make poor Affie turn in his grave, nothing will," Mrs. De Robert uttered aloud.

"It seems clearly my duty, under the circumstances, to keep back a portion alike of treasure and money in reserve. The possibility of such a claimant coming forward at the eleventh hour had to be provided against."

Here he glanced encouragingly at Sabina and Prue.

"Of course, compensation was to have been made to the ladies in money. I therefore proposed to retain the rest of the heirlooms for the present."

"We'll make the round of all the pawnbrokers' shops in London and ferret the things out," once more whispered Mrs. De Robert, nudging Eugenia. "I'm sure we deserve them as much as any of 'em."

"The result has shown that such a precaution was by no means unnecessary," continued the Vicar, now contemptuously ignoring all interruptions. "Last evening, at a late hour, I received a telegram from a

sixth claimant, whose presence may daily, nay, hourly, be expected amongst us."

This crowning surprise was too much even for the circumspect Miss Ivory.

"Your genteel young man!" she whispered, pressing her old friend's hand; "I felt sure he would come at the last."

Mrs. De Robert's face beamed with exultation. She looked ready to embrace everybody in the room.

The demeanour of the expectant heirs was characteristic: the Doctor clapped his hands as if he were at the play; his senior looked resigned; the priest, as if just told by the dentist that the wrong tooth had been pulled out. Sabina searched her memory for some comfortable apothegm of the ever-sapient Edwin. Prue wiped away a meek tear.

"Under these circumstances," Mr. Meridian made haste to explain, "it is expedient to defer the final settlement of affairs. In the mean time," here he glanced at the discomposed audience, "pray be under no misapprehension. The claim, so late put in, will not be permitted to supersede others as valid, or materially to alter the disposition of the property."

"I've a finger in that pie!" Mrs. De Robert whispered viciously.

"The subdivision may have to be rearranged," Mr. Meridian added. "Some readjustment, some modification, may be necessary——"

"I should just say so!" Mrs. De Robert murmured.

Not condescending to notice the offence, the Vicar went on:

"The newly-discovered member of the De Robert

family possesses one qualification that, to say the least of it, emphasises his claim——”

Just then a sudden commotion was heard throughout the house—bells were rung impatiently, doors flew open; the scurrying feet and excited voices of domestics in hasty conclave betokened some unusual event.

“This must be our expected visitor!” Mr. Meridian said, looking at Mrs. De Robert and Miss Ivory as he put down his papers.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### MRS. DE ROBERT'S GENTEEL YOUNG MAN.

IT were hard to say which of the two showed most curiosity, Mrs. De Robert or Miss Ivory, as they hurried out of the room to welcome the stranger. The elder lady's inquisitiveness, like the younger's, was tinged with romance. Whilst Eugenia perhaps expected to find some melancholy Ravenswood or imperious Rochester, Mrs. De Robert had evidently made up her mind that the newcomer was some dashing Peregrine Pickle, a harum-scarum, but to settle down in time the very model of a country gentleman. She had cherished the belief from the first that such a claimant would come forward, carrying off not only the family treasure, but the beautiful Miss Ivory—her own Eugenia.

The two ladies made the best of their way to the entrance hall, which presented a scene of pleasing confusion. A foreign atmosphere reigned throughout the place. Snatches of foreign speech reached their ears, outlandish objects met their eyes—Oriental travelling gear, brilliant rugs, bundles wrapt up in gorgeous silk handkerchiefs, gaily ornamented baskets, and an amount of nondescript luggage that filled the place. Everything, indeed, savoured of surprises. Instead of one stranger, there were two; two figures, at any rate, stood in the doorway, both as romantic as if they had been cut out of picture-books. The first, that of a man

of middle height, slender, with a winning but somewhat anxious physiognomy, advanced towards the ladies, pouring out incomprehensible words of apology and explanation.

Now, as far as Mrs. De Robert and Eugenia were concerned, the stranger's speeches might just as well have been uttered in Hindostanee as in French. The elder lady's travelling experience consisted of a fortnight's honeymoon in Paris, years and years before. Miss Ivory had never so much as set foot out of her own island; and, although she by no means lacked the usual accomplishments of a young lady, "French of Paris" was to her unknown. Scant need, however, of interpreter have those drawn towards each other by instinctive liking and sympathy. Mrs. De Robert listened, smiled, and acquiesced, understanding as well as could be what all this eloquence was about; and her monosyllabic replies amply sufficed to set the newcomer at his ease. He saw plainly enough that his appearance was very welcome. His kinswoman, so morose to his predecessors, was now positively radiant. She felt, indeed, that she had hardly anything left to wish for. The genteel young man had appeared in the very nick of time. The thumb-screwing Jesuit, the men with seven wives apiece, and the cheese-paring old maids should not carry off all the spoil, after all.

Eugenia's feelings were of a wholly different order. The notion of the least injustice being done to the other claimants was very painful to her. She did not wish the strangers to be benefited at the expense of the rest. But such surprises were pleasant. A French-speaking guest was a novelty, decidedly an adventure;

and to Miss Ivory, as to the most of her sex, an agreeable exterior and a fascinating manner in the other are ever welcome.

The "genteel young man" of Mrs. De Robert's aspirations proved, of course, a myth. We must be always satisfied to have one-half of our expectations realised and let the other go. The newcomer was certainly not young, and not quite what old-fashioned folks would call genteel. He had passed the Dantesque half-way of existence, anyhow, and perhaps might never see his fortieth birthday again. His appearance, moreover, was that of a man whose days have been spent in hardship and adventure. There was almost the look of a soldier about him, so sunburnt his complexion, so weather-beaten his appearance. The cloak, too, that hung about his shoulders had a military look. And the cloak as well as the rest of his garments were well worn, even to shabbiness. He was evidently one of those men who have scant leisure to confabulate with their tailor. But the air of distinction, the inborn dignity, the charm of amiable character, betrayed themselves through these lendings.

After a highly animated speech, evidently introductory and apologetic, and every syllable of which the ladies had to guess at, he turned to look for his travelling companion. This was a boy of about ten, apparently of pure Arab blood, and with a beautiful Biblical face. Just such engaging little Ishmaels—only in a state of nudity—the traveller meets with who ventures beyond the Gallicised circle of Algeria. The child looked gentle enough, and in his red fez and nondescript costume, half-cosmopolitan, half-Oriental,



made a charming tableau in the hall. As to the servants, they stood gaping at the little fellow as if he were some wild animal of unknown species.

Meantime, the conclave in the breakfast-parlour had broken up in great confusion. Mr. Meridian dismissed the claimants, first reassuring them as to the consequences of this event. He should adhere to his own division of the property—that is to say, of the available property—through thick and through thin. If the works of art, the antiquities, and the jewels had vanished, fortunately the money remained; and the money equitably divided would be theirs.

Mr. Meridian then introduced himself in the stiff literary French he was master of, and matters greatly simplified themselves. The newcomer thereupon took courage, tried to speak English—broke down laughingly, tried again; finally, all went as smoothly as possible.

“I am really an Englishman,” he said, advancing towards Mrs. De Robert, and without the least hesitation or apology kissing her on either cheek.

Next he moved towards Miss Ivory, and seemed about to embrace her after French fashion also; but her blush and deprecating smile made him draw back.

“Is not this, then, my kinswoman too?” he said, fascinated by the beautiful apparition—apparition indeed it seemed.

There was much more than mere feminine witchery about Miss Ivory. Nature had not only superabundantly endowed her with outward charm, grace, and spirit: the qualities of the heart were there also, and far outshone these; so much rarer are naturalness, transparency crystal-clear, and affectionate enthusiasm,

than dark eyes, a complexion of pearl, and features with which critics can find no fault!

"Your relation?" bluntly retorted Mrs. De Robert. "Not she, and none the worse for that. And now pray tell us all about this little Ishmael with eyes like blackberries."

"This little fellow," replied the newcomer, gathering rather the drift than the literal meaning of her speech—"this poor child"—and so saying, he patted him encouragingly on the head—"is my son——"

"I'll never believe it!" cried Mrs. De Robert, staring at the boy. "He's brown as Joseph and his brethren, and your own eyes blue as willow-pattern china."

"My son—by adoption," he replied, again divining rather than understanding the drift of the interruption. "I must tell you his history, and my own too. First let me present my offerings from sunny Africa."

Then he bustled about with the boy and produced a variety of gifts for grace, use, and degustation—a carpet bright and variegated as an Algerian meadow in April; a semitransparent cream-coloured shawl, made to set off the beauty of the dark-eyed Mauresque; gay earthen vessels, absolutely novel to these untravelled eyes; and appetising baskets of bananas, olives, dates, and figs.

"Deary me!" ejaculated Mrs. De Robert; "very good of you to spend all this money on me, I am sure! I only hope you could well spare it. However, I've always heard that these things are dirt-cheap in foreign parts—that's one comfort. Well, little darkie, let's make a clearance; and then we'll go to dinner—if we've got any dinner amid all this commotion!"

Mr. Meridian, although pressed to stay, now took his

leave. The servants bustled about. The visitor and his young companion were conducted to the best bed-chamber. The Algerian gifts were made a show of in the drawing-room. Then the little party sat down to the 1 o'clock dinner, all in airy mood.

Now, such is the contrariety of human nature that Mrs. De Robert would have welcomed this Benjamin, this prodigal son of claimants, under any circumstances. The genial, handsome stranger—for handsome he was, in spite of his somewhat worn and weather-beaten appearance—might have been ungainly as *Æsop* and ugly as *Socrates*, her heart would have warmed to him all the same. She had not wanted the others—that was the plain truth of it; but this one she did want, if for no better reason, because he had not come before. And, so at least she persuaded herself, he possessed the true De Robert physiognomy: he was the very image of her darling Affie.

When she discovered that his name was Alfred too, her delight knew no bounds. An heir who was at the same time a namesake!—the very acme of her husband's wishes! As the newcomer gaily carved the chickens, and at the same time told his story, she sat gazing on him with a look of fascination.

"It is by the barest chance that I am here," he said, helping himself with a pocket-dictionary. "Who could have supposed that an army-surgeon, stationed on the very borders of the Sahara, living amongst *Bedouins* and French soldiers, should have heard of something to his advantage awaiting him in England!—at home, I should say, being English. Sufficient to say now that my name is plain Alfred Robert, the *de* having been dropped since my grandfather, a Protestant,

settled in France. So here I am, by profession an army-surgeon, native of beautiful, unhappy Algeria, the land of flowers, sunshine, famine, earthquake, and assassinations."

"Algerly!" cried Mrs. De Robert, dropping her knife and fork. "That is the country I should like to see above every other."

"Nothing easier," cried her newly-found kinsman enthusiastically, and looking at Eugenia. "I will convoy you thither. Make my bachelor quarters your own. I am now stationed in a spot that can only be described as an earthly paradise."

"Famine, assassinations, and earthquakes are hardly attractive," said Miss Ivory.

"Things are better now. I am alluding to the past," continued Monsieur Robert. "These miseries pass and leave no trace behind. See how light-hearted, how gay, I am; yet I have had to keep my fast also. I have seen people dying of hunger around me. That poor boy yonder is one of the thousands whom the last great famine orphaned."

"So you fathered him!" Mrs. De Robert said. "I felt sure you were a kind-hearted creature. But go on!"

"The place I am describing lies on the border of the vast plateaux that divide flowery Algeria from the pathless desert. Remote although it be, a stray English tourist occasionally finds his way thither; from one of these I learned that inquiries were being made for me at home. I am a naturalised Frenchman, and I love my adopted country; England seems my home, for all that."

"We'll go to Algerly with him—that we will!" Mrs. De Robert said. "But don't let me interrupt."

"It was no easy matter for me to absent myself. Time pressed. Official leave of absence had to be obtained, a substitute found; but all these difficulties were at last overcome, and here I am!"

"What made you bring that poor little thing with you?" asked Mrs. De Robert, looking at the child.

The army-surgeon reddened like a girl and, for a moment, showed painful embarrassment. He turned over the pages of his dictionary in search of a word, began to speak, faltered; then, summoning courage, got out, in the same intelligible French-English:

"I must candidly confess that I brought the child as a living argument on behalf of my cause. I do not need money for myself. My wants are few, and for these the modest emoluments of my profession suffice. I am covetous for my orphans. This is not the only one I have adopted, and it is on their account I cross the sea."

"I was in hopes you had a wife and a young family of your own," Mrs. De Robert said, rather taken aback; "but all in good time. We'll find him an English wife—wont we, Ivey?"

Nothing, indeed, could damp Mrs. De Robert's ardour just then. The last piece of information was somewhat disconcerting. A colony of little Arabs seemed almost as objectionable, in the light of heirs, as Jesuit and Mormons; but this charming Affie would marry an English girl, and thus make everything right.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### CLERICAL MOONLIGHTERS.

**J**UST when the festivity at Hopedale Manor had reached its acme, a curious scene was taking place at the Vicarage.

Mr. Meridian, of course, did not dance. He looked in just as the guests were arriving, and promised to return in time for the banquet. Then, accompanied by the priest only, and provided with a latchkey, he went back to his deserted Vicarage. Such an entertainment was of too rare occurrence in the quiet village to be missed; so, very considerately, he had permitted his household to share the diversions of the evening. "Nobody need return," he said, "till he should give the word of command."

As the pair passed down the village street they found every house dark and not a soul astir. The fact was, every one had gone to look at the dancing. Ball-dresses, waxlights, garlands, made a fairy-like spectacle to unaccustomed eyes. The band, too, of itself afforded a treat of the first water. The night was warm to sultriness, every door and window stood open; and as waltz, quadrille, and mazurka succeeded each other, the inspiriting strains reached the village.

That lively music jarred on the Vicar's nerves just then. His usual flow of conversation stopped. Admirably as the priest's companionship suited him, sym-

pathetic and genial as they ever found each other, to-night Mr. Meridian was absent and almost morose.

Was it the sight of Miss Ivory as she joined in the dance that disconcerted him? She wore pearls in her dark hair and round her slender throat; pearly, too, the rich white silk ball-dress, well becoming her spirited, uncommon beauty. As she flashed past in the waltz, now with the witty American, now with the vivacious stranger, he began to feel vaguely that she was lost to him.

The gas throughout the Vicarage was turned down, and silence reigned everywhere. A furtive peeper, watching the two silent figures as they noiselessly stole upstairs, might have supposed them bent on some nefarious or uncanny errand. The Vicar, although in his own house, seemed to realise the necessity of wariness. The priest hardly looked at ease.

They reached the landing-place; then Mr. Meridian lighted a night-candle, and opening a door bade his companion note the number of steps before him.

"I am taking you to a part of the Vicarage unused in my time, or only devoted to the stowage of lumber," he said; "yet these nurseries are the most commodious and pleasantest rooms in the house."

A passage was now crossed, a second door opened, and the host invited his guest to enter.

An ejaculation of wonder and delight escaped the lips of the priest; he stood on the threshold, enraptured at the dazzling scene so suddenly revealed to him.

"Will you come inside?" said the Vicar. "There is nobody in the house; but, under the circumstances, we cannot exercise too much caution."

The priest obeyed; the Vicar locked the door from within, and the survey began.

The gas was now fully turned on, and the room blazed with light on every side. Rare and beautiful objects met the eye. The beholder was suddenly spirited away to a palace of art.

Choice pictures covered the walls, antique silver shone resplendent, gems flashed, armour gleamed; whilst at the farther end of the room, bright, rosy, golden, as if painted but yesterday, hung a lovely and inimitable Murillo.

"Being somewhat pressed for time, we had better take each object as it comes," Mr. Meridian said, brief and business-like. "Here we have before us the entire De Robert collection, without the Murillo worth several thousand pounds. You will see that there is a little, a very little of everything, but that little of first-rate quality. The heirlooms proper—in other words, that portion of the collection really handed down from one De Robert to another—are of very inferior interest or value."

Thus saying, he led his visitor to a stand of old-fashioned plate engraved with the family crest and motto; handsome and massy it certainly was, but of a kind to use, not look at. There were the much-talked-of candlesticks, at which the priest looked longingly; the flower-basket of chaste design, and much else—all deeply interesting to a dealer in bric-à-brac.

"Strange how comparatively worthless is splendour without individuality, wealth unemphasised!" said the Vicar. "Melt down yonder service to-morrow, and you would get your precise equivalent in hard cash. Throw this into your melting-pot, and you lose something for ever."



Thus saying, he took up a tiny silver casket having a graceful design in relief on the sides and lid. It was a veritable gem of the silversmith's art—a trifle, but a trifle the great Cellini might have owned to without shame.

"There speaks the true artist," he said, as he laid it down; and they passed on, the priest keenly anxious to get to the Murillo. Mr. Meridian, however, insisted on seeing everything in its proper order.

"These two pieces of tapestry," he said, "evidently formed part of a series illustrating the exploits of some mediæval freebooter. For what small mercies have we to be thankful in matters of history! The respectable folks, if any existed, have slipped through our fingers altogether. The historian, the artist, the poet, immortalise the villainous or the reckless! I should give these tapestries a Flemish origin—would not you?"

"In all probability it is so," the priest replied absently.

"We have here some beautiful specimens of old French *faïence*; to my thinking, one of the most charming and satisfying of the arts. Painters and sculptors wrought for the temple, the palace; the potter brings art to the home. Look at this bit of early Limoges, an imperishable nosegay in porcelain; these roses and lilies, modelled perhaps when a Valois reigned in France, may outlive all the dynasties of Europe."

The priest was too hurried to comment on this sentiment.

"We have more time at our disposal than you imagine," Mr. Meridian said; "pray do not be in too great haste. The armour well deserves inspection: it is the most interesting of the family relics."

He drew back a few steps in order to take a better view.

"I fear we moderns, for the most part—I for one, certainly—should cut but a poor figure in such accoutrements. The weight is enormous. There was some difficulty about the matter, or I should have had it weighed. Of course, a fighting-man in those days was a mere animal, strong as an ox, perhaps hardly more intelligent. In our own time, we must be content, I suppose, to read the reviews, keep apace with the Spencian philosophy, and not trouble our heads whether we are provided with muscle or no."

His companion just paused a moment before the armour and that was all. The Murillo at the bottom of the room attracted him as a candle attracts the moth.

"I do not know why jewellery always exercises such a fascination over the mind," Mr. Meridian said, now stopping before a little case of jewels. He could easily have answered such a question for himself, had he tried. "Is it because jewels are inseparably associated with what everybody hears of and nobody sees—court pageants, world-famous beauties, and the like? All of us have heard of Cleopatra's pearl; how few ever gaze on a Cleopatra!"

As he spoke, his eyes dwelt wistfully on a superb ruby pendant with antique setting; it shone conspicuous amid minor gems—matchless rose in a garden plot. The stones were of rare brilliance and purity.

"Yes, a very beautiful ornament indeed!" the priest said carelessly, and moved a step forward. Only a case of quaint old snuff-boxes now stood between him and the Murillo.

But Mr. Meridian gazed and gazed like one under a

spell. His companion called attention to this object and that; he did not so much as hear the remarks. The priest edged on, and finally moved in front of the Murillo. The Vicar did not stir.

That resplendent jewel, globe of richest crimson light, suggested thoughts of Miss Ivory. Just as the ruby outshone its neighbouring gems, so, to his thinking, did she shine supreme among women. And the one seemed made for the other. To him, the very thought of any one else wearing the ruby pendant was intolerable. Beautiful as she looked to-night in her white satin dress, with its simple garniture of pearls, he was longing to see her exchange this pale radiance for the most sumptuous adornment of crimson velvet and rubies. He was saying to himself that if ever any woman could look a born queen, meet for a Sebastian di Piombo to portray, it would be Miss Ivory thus arrayed. The longer and more steadfastly he gazed on the jewel, the more fixed became this idea. Miss Ivory and no one else must possess and wear it. He fancied he saw her before him, and conjured up the vision so intensely that at last it grew bewildering. For a moment he was transported with a lover's ecstasy.

The priest also fell into a transport, but of wholly different kind. No sooner did he behold the Madonna of his dreams, the Madonna so familiar, although now gazed on for the first time, than he fell on his knees in the rapt attitude of prayer. The beautiful altar-piece made the place a veritable church to him. Outsiders might cavil at the action, colder worshippers resent the mood, but both indicated genuine religious feeling on his part. It was feeling of mixed kind. He was suddenly recalled to bygone days and the rapture of the

novitiate. He was reminded of present needs and aspirations, of the Church's needs and aspirations represented in his own person.

By Divine favour that altar-piece should be his and his only: it must not fall into mundane hands.

He was offering up a prayer to his Madonna in heaven for the possession of this earthly semblance. Alike religious fervour and personal motives impelled him to such appeal. Passionately as the Vicar longed to see the ruby pendant set off Miss Ivory's beauty, with equal fervour the priest craved the picture for his Sovereign Lady and Holy Mother, the Church. If the one was actuated by earthly love of exalted kind, the other's yearnings were at least free from worldly taint. Both for a brief moment clutched at an ideal, breathed the atmosphere of a far-off, intangible world, became oblivious of self and of all that is comprehended in the word. The priest was lost in silent prayer; the Vicar's mood was almost as reverential.

"I think we had better go now," at length Mr. Meridian said, suddenly recalled to realities. "It is past midnight. A fine picture, is it not?" he added, as they turned their backs on the Murillo. "You may consider it yours."

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### BACCHANALIAN.

VERY different was the behaviour of Mr. Bacchus. Whilst Mr. Meridian kept away as much as possible from the festive scene, Mr. Bacchus entered heart and soul into the gaieties of the evening. He too realised all that the *fête* indicated—a general break-up of this pleasant little society, a sudden calm after feverish excitement—Miss Ivory's departure; and, after Miss Ivory's departure, the deluge—in other words, flatness, no sort of interest about anything, gloom and despair. Under the circumstances, the lights, the music, the joyous bustle of the ball-room were not only distasteful, they were odious, to Mr. Meridian. But for civility's sake, he would have preferred to remain away altogether.

The Curate assumed a gala mood with the rest. He said to himself that, if all happiness and enjoyment were to be denied him on the morrow, it was the best possible reason for quaffing both to the last drop to-day. He compared himself to a bankrupt; the creditors would take ruthless possession of goods and chattels next day. Till they come, was the Curate's motto, let me fancy myself a solvent man; let me imagine the plate, the wine, the lackeys, mine still.

Mr. Meridian behaved like some wretch condemned to lifelong imprisonment. Away with flowers, music,

and woman's smile! was his creed. Away with all that reminds me of a world never more to be my own! Let me prepare myself as best I can for the life in death to which I shall awake to-morrow.

"After all," Mr. Bacchus said, as he drew on his gloves, about to lead Miss Ivory through the quadrille, "my mind is quite made up about one thing. The most enviable condition in life is that of a nobody, an out-and-out nonentity. Were I Archbishop of Canterbury at this moment, I should be ready to hang myself."

"And why?" asked Eugenia.

"Because I could not dance with you, of course! How very little there is you can do when you get to the top of the social tree—in the way of innocent enjoyment, I mean! Now just because I am a half-starved Curate, I can follow the bent of my inclinations—waltz, act in 'Box and Cox,' run bicycle races; in fact, I am as independent as if the whole world belonged to me. I don't know how you feel about these matters; but I would not be Plenipotentiary to China, or even Hairdresser to the Queen, for anything. The responsibilities attached to such positions must be maddening. Responsibility reduced to a minimum—ah! that is my ideal; to my thinking, the *summum bonum* of earthly felicity!"

"How happy you would be if you could get through life without a head on your shoulders!" laughed Miss Ivory.

"And without a heart in my bosom! Rid me of that incubus, and I'll put up with the inconvenience of the other," said the poor Curate in ecstasy, one moment reduced to despondency, the next ready to laugh and cry in a breath.

He realised the hopelessness of his passion. He knew, as well as Eugenia could have told him, that the dignities of Plenipotentiary to China or Hairdresser to the Queen were easier of attainment than her hand; but he could not help dwelling on his infatuation, feeling proud of it, delighting in the torment it gave him.

"I don't think jelly-fish are interesting," Miss Ivory said. "Depend on it, you are best as you are."

If love-making could make a woman happy, Miss Ivory got enough of it that night. The suitors, one and all, felt that their last chance of speaking out had come. Not only was she on the point of disappearing from Hopedale—in other words from the ken of both Vicar and Curate; the Transatlantic wooers saw before them a parting still more hopeless. Neither Miss Ivory nor Mrs. De Robert seemed drawn towards Columbia. They talked of visiting Switzerland, the Rhine, Italy—Bongo; but never by any chance mentioned the Kentucky caves or Niagara.

The expression "Transatlantic wooers" may well be used, seeing that the nephew's courtship was chiefly done by the uncle. The epigrammatic Doctor was not only proud, but shy. He wanted Eugenia to understand exactly how matters stood with him; at the same time, he wished to spare her the humiliation of having in her turn to humiliate. He said to himself that there were more ways than one of letting a woman know you want to marry her; that if, for reasons best known to herself, she has nothing to say to you, 'tis only a nincompoop who cannot find it out.

Nevertheless, the wisest resolves are oftentimes shaken in unexpected fashion. The Doctor was no more insensible than any other mortal to the witchery of music,

roses, and the dance. Miss Ivory's appearance, coupled with these, seemed more captivating than ever. Surely homage were legitimate and timely just then!

Throughout the evening he had kept a sharp look-out on the movements of his uncle. He knew well enough that all one man can say on another's behalf would be said by his advocate, if opportunity offered. He might reason, expostulate; nothing could prevent the elder Derrober from pleading his nephew's forlorn cause. Forlorn it was, without doubt; yet, under these festive influences, he grew animated and hopeful.

"Did you observe me whilst you were deep in con-fabulation with that ancient harum-scarum, that venerable giddy-pate yonder?" he asked of Miss Ivory. They were about to dance a mazurka together, and awaited the striking up of the band.

Eugenia looked conscious.

"Were you not taking part in the quadrille? I fancy you had Miss Prudence Perfect for a partner!"

"Right, so far; and at what distance, measured by the yard-measure, do you presume I might be from you whilst so engaged?"

"Really I have no idea!" she said, smiling.

"Well, these details matter little. Considering that the band was playing all the while, and that the rest of the dancers were laughing and talking, as well as my partner and myself, I could not, of course, have heard a syllable of your discourse had you both shouted like town-criers. I know every word my beloved old cur-mudgeon whispered in your ear, for all that; aye, and what is more, every word you uttered by way of reply!"

"You could make a fortune, then, as a walking tele-phone," Eugenia replied jestingly, although ill at ease.



She did not feel in the least afraid of poor Mr. Bacchus. The Doctor, as well as Mr. Meridian, made her timid, apprehensive.

"I will show you twenty ways of making a fortune: show me one of enjoying it!" cried the Doctor. "But now for a sample of my divining powers."

"Why repeat what you say we both know already?" said Eugenia.

"I know that I know. I want to convince you of the fact," was the reply. "I warrant it, the first point my respected uncle tried to impress upon you was the amiable character of his nephew. Did he not say, or make a tantamount assertion, that there was not another fellow like him for tenderness of heart, scrupulous delicacy of feeling, devotion, and so forth and so forth? Don't believe a word of it! 'Tis all Brummagem, hocus-pocus, and fiddle-de-dee! Then the old gentleman goes on to gild his gingerbread a little thicker. 'Speak of his heart, madam! I might go on praising it till I burst—I might indeed. Gold is not the word for it. We must discover a purer metal. But when you come to his parts, his mental qualities, there you have me—I am about as much of an orator as a donkey in ecstasies over a bed of thistles. Look you, madam! this man is a pearl cast on the dunghill of society. Why is he not glorious, in everybody's mouth, hand and glove with grandees, a figure at court in velvet and silk stockings? Just because wit is no longer at a premium in this dull world. Society can get on without it. Were Plato now living, he would have to higgle and haggle for his bread, like any penny-a-liner. Shakespeare would never be asked out to dinner. Lord Bacon himself would not find a publisher. My nephew,

now—he—' but why repeat the dear old gentleman's words? We can all be as fluent as Cicero about anything we want to get rid of. I assure you, on my word of honour, that my uncle is dreaming. There is not a particle of veracity in what he says. He is all froth and imagination. If there exists a poor creature, a man who has not a good word to say on his own behalf, that man's name is Franklin Derrober."

"You do not flatter yourself," Eugenia said, hardly knowing whether to be sad or merry.

"Do not jump with such haste at conclusions," continued the Doctor. "The poorest creature that ever lived may have a redeeming quality, a flash of compensatory insight." He looked at her earnestly, and continued in a voice full of deep meaning: "Were I to go on my own way to the end, smug, serene, self-confident, never allowing myself to be carried an inch to the right or the left, either by love or any other folly, I might justifiably indulge in self-contempt. But to aspire after an ideal unreachable as the moon; to part with one's peace of mind, with ambition and all realities, for the sake of a dream—yes, you must admit there is virtue here! A man is at least a degree above a worm, who woos the impossible——"

"You are romancing, too," Eugenia said, smiling, yet sad. "Such ideals, such dreams, have to do with great deeds, not with mere happiness in the power of any woman to give."

"Contradict me as much as you please; what does it matter? Confess, when we come to realities, you have not so much as a crumb to bestow on the starving robin at your window, much less a whole loaf for the tattered beggar at your door."

"And that may be no fault of mine," Miss Ivory said, softly and sorrowfully. This strange scene was making her feel contrite and unhappy.

"Answer me," he said quickly. "At least one starving robin, one tattered beggar, is no more to you than another? Your heart is free?"

She laughed somewhat bitterly.

"The heart—the heart!" she cried. "Is everything in life decided by feeling? Who is entirely free?"

She was thinking of Mr. Meridian, and of the claims he had upon her. Before the Doctor could put in a word, there he stood! The signal for supper was given. The Vicar now recalled her promise of accepting his arm. She could dance all the evening with the rest; the least she could do was to give him her company now.

"We will resume our conversation at some future time: to-morrow—or in Paradise," the Doctor said, jesting bitterly, as she turned away with Mr. Meridian.

The Vicar, Eugenia thought, looked careworn, even haggard; all the more so by comparison with his neighbours. Opposite to them now sat Mrs. De Robert, squired, as she called it, by her French nephew, the newcomer from the borders of the African desert. Whilst the sunburnt army-surgeon was all geniality, *insouciance*, and light-heartedness, his hostess beamed with exultation. The old lady was triumphant as a maiden beside her affianced lover. Her cheeks were flushed with pleasure. She was for the moment all smiles and good-humour. This young man—thus she persisted in calling him, although he was hardly younger than Dr. Derrober—this French nephew—here her language was equally hyperbolic, his relationship

being as remote as that of her Transatlantic kinsmen; in fact, she might almost as well have called Mr. Meridian a nephew—seemed to have charmed away all acerbity and waspishness. There she sat close to him, devouring every look, hanging on every word. “My own darling Affie to the life,” she murmured to herself again and again; and, what was more, recognised as a darling in his lifetime!

It was not only the stranger’s pleasant looks and supposed likeness to her husband that fascinated her; his conversation flowed in a bright, joyous stream, and all that he said interested. He called her aunt in French, and gracefully and endearingly acted the part of a son; now wrapping a shawl about her shoulders, now pressing her to eat of this dish or that, now helping her in the duties of hostess.

“I’ll tell you what it is, Affie dear,” she said, in an undertone: “we’ll go back with you to Algery.” Glancing slyly at Miss Ivory, she went on: “That dear girl and I sadly want to visit foreign parts, and we have no one to take us. We’ll pack our trunks—no great affair that!—and off we’ll start with you, no matter what any one chooses to say.”

The last remark was accompanied with a malicious look at the unconscious Vicar.

Mr. Meridian was far from concerning himself with Mrs. De Robert and her new guest at that moment. He sat by Eugenia’s side, mute and self-absorbed, making hopeless efforts to break the spell that bound him.

“You eat nothing!” she said reproachfully.

“I always regard ball-room suppers as a premium put upon the seductive pastime of dancing, or—shall I

say?—a penalty incurred by devotees of frivolity," he replied. "However, I will willingly give myself a week's indigestion for the sake of gratifying you"—whereupon he helped himself to the first dish that stood handy.

"What have you been about all the evening?" asked Miss Ivory.

"You have grown delightfully inquisitive concerning my movements all on a sudden," he replied, yielding to the fascination of the hour.

He thought he had never seen her so adorable; and his adoration, as near akin to worship as was possible in such a nature, betrayed itself but too well.

"Is it to be wondered at just now?" Eugenia asked. "You are the Sphinx, the oracle, whose utterances we are waiting for in breathless uncertainty."

"I wish there was any uncertainty about the utterances of another Sphinx," he said. Then anxious to avoid personalities, though burning with impatience to speak out, he made a great effort and talked brilliantly and amusingly for half an hour.

But she saw through the veil; and no declaration of sentiment, however impassioned, could have moved her more than this stern piece of self-mastery. Even in little things he wished to be considerate, and considerateness in little things is the touchstone of a fine nature.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### UNTANGLING THE THREADS.

THAT festive evening was pregnant with consequences. "My mind is quite made up, Eugenio," Mrs. De Robert said next day. "We'll be off in post-haste to Algery; and nobody shall say us nay. 'Tis a sweet pretty place, as I have always heard say; and Affie will be there to protect us from Bedouin assassins. You'll go, won't you?"

Whither, indeed, would not Miss Ivory go just then? For her, too, the plot had thickened; the threads of Fate were becoming more distractingly entangled than ever. Algeria enticed from the distance as a harbour of refuge.

"We'll be off before my first twinge of lumbago," Mrs. De Robert said, much as if the first twinge of lumbago were a fixed date in the almanac; "and we needn't stay if we don't like it, you know! We can come back on the day for leaving off winter flannels." That event, according to Mrs. De Robert's thinking, seemed also marked in the calendar.

"It will be very pleasant," replied Eugenia musingly. "Pleasant, too, the feeling that everything is settled at last."

"And settled my own way, not Mr. Meridian's," chuckled Mrs. De Robert. "He is not going to turn the four sails of my mill, I can tell him!"

Eugenia looked reproachful, as she always did when Mrs. De Robert broached theories of this kind.

"To late to interfere now, Roberta! You must not act unhandsomely at the last moment."

"If a thousand pounds isn't handsome, what is—what is, I should like to know?" Mrs. De Robert said, emphasising the repetition. "They shall have a thousand pounds apiece—I mean the old ladies, and the missionary, and the Americans—and Affie the rest. He is sure to marry some day—a handsome young man like that! There may be a real heir to the property after all, and my poor darling will at last rest in his grave."

"In my opinion," Miss Ivory said, "it would be much better to leave the matter to Mr. Meridian. He will act fairly, and whatever happens you need not then reproach yourself. And you can give your genteel young man what you like afterwards. You are always saying that you have no legatees but cats and dogs."

"I don't want to come to blows with the Vicar. Disagreeable as he can be, he has saved me no end of trouble. But what can he have to find fault with in my plan? Isn't a thousand pounds worth crossing the water for? They'll be pleased enough, depend on it!"

"But Mr. Meridian had your full authority to act from the beginning, and is pledged now to an equal subdivision."

"I'll tell you what it is, then, Ivey," she added. "If you pack off with Affie and myself to Algery, I don't care a straw about the rest! And they won't get the Murilly, and the silver basket, and the old china—that's one comfort!" She chuckled over the thought. "How these things disappeared is a mystery to me. Do put on your hat, and hear what the Vicar has to say

about the business. And pray tell him that we are off this day week."

Miss Ivory looked as if the errand were not exactly to her taste just then. She also had something to say to Mr. Meridian, and wanted to get it over; but she hardly felt in the humour to have a tooth drawn at that moment.

"The sooner all this is settled the better," Mrs. De Robert added persuasively. "We cannot be too brisk about starting. If we put it off, a dozen more folks may come after the money; and if not, something else is sure to prevent us from starting, at the eleventh hour. No, Ivey, we won't wait a month, nor a fortnight, nor even ten days. We'll start on our travels this day week. So do go and see the Vicar at once."

Miss Ivory realised the force of these arguments. Yes: the sooner present uncertainties were ended, and *imbroglios* cleared up, the better for all. She set off for the Vicarage at once.

Mr. Meridian received his visitor in the charming study that might well have reconciled some men to bachelorhood. Without and within, all was pleasantness and repose. The room was tastefully, almost coquettishly, furnished, and opened on to a little rose-garden, quietude itself but for the notes of birds.

Pleasantness and repose, as far as circumstances were concerned, had certainly fallen to the Vicar's share. Unruffled by vulgar anxieties or mundane cares; born to an easy, dignified, and congenial position; endowed with moral and intellectual gifts that command respect, if they do not readily inspire affection—a supremely happy man might Mr. Meridian have been but for one drawback. He hungered after Eugenia's appreciation, and the more he hungered the farther it seemed off.



"Mrs. De Robert asked me to call upon you," she began; and as she spoke she looked at her host searchingly. "She wants to know if you see any chance of recovering the lost property."

Mr. Meridian's face was absolutely unreadable as he made curt reply:

"None whatever. Let Mrs. De Robert make her mind perfectly easy on that score."

Eugenia was a deep young lady, but her insight was tempered by discretion. Seeing that the Vicar was determined to be uncommunicative, she passed on to another subject.

"Mrs. De Robert seems quite decided to go back with her latest visitor to Algeria. She would like to start in a week's time."

"Pray tell her that the affairs she has intrusted to me shall present no obstacle. I distribute the money formally to-morrow. The twenty thousand pounds will be divided into six equal shares, and distributed amongst her next of kin—so called. Nothing then need prevent a general departure."

He spoke with feigned indifference, affecting to hide the shock her news had given him. Inwardly he was shaken to the very depths of his nature. It was very difficult for him to veil his real mood; and in jest and satire appeared the only means of escape.

"You may realise your fondest aspirations and get to Bongo, after all," he said. "How could I be so cruel as to laugh these bright visions to scorn? But you will have your revenge. You will ride on a camel in mid Africa, whilst I sit mewed up at home writing sermons for clodhoppers to drowse over."

"We intend to return next spring," she said, in a

voice of meek apology. Every word he had just uttered came as a stinging reproach.

"Ah," he replied, "take my advice, and, having once turned your back upon Hopedale, never dream of coming this way again as long as you live; you have no idea how insupportable we should all appear to you! The very holly-trees would be odious because they are not palms, and even the poor sheep would give offence because they are not gazelles. I know how it is with you travelled folk!"

"Travel is not generally supposed to soften people's brains," Eugenia retorted, with much temper. Why—oh, why was not Mr. Meridian amiable!

"But, what is ten times worse, it hardens their hearts," he continued, in the same strain of light yet cutting banter. "Nothing like a trip up the Nile to render your next-door neighbours insufferable; whilst a voyage round the world has been known to turn the mildest into critics sour as vinegar. You see, we are very poor creatures; but it is not till our friends sharpen their wits by travel that they find it out!"

Eugenia could but feel that there was some truth at the bottom of this raillery. She knew as well as the Vicar could tell her that she should not return to Hopedale precisely the same Eugenia who went away. Things would appear different to her. Her judgments and, as a natural consequence, her likings and antipathies would be modified. She might appreciate Mr. Meridian's good qualities all the more after a temporary separation. What seemed likelier far was that new life, new influences, new modes of thought might estrange her from the Vicar altogether.

She, too, as well as Mrs. De Robert, was conscious

of the stranger's fascination. The foreign atmosphere he had introduced, the new ideas and standards of thought suggested by his conversation, his Gallic gaiety and openness of mind, were very engaging. For the first time in her existence she had come in contact with a temperament directly the reverse of our own insular sedateness and reserve.

The gay yet much-tried army-surgeon, whose hopefulness and vivacity the severest ordeals could not check, was no mere adventurer, living morally, as well as materially, from hand to mouth. He was wedded to a duty arduous and ill-remunerated as can well fall to the share of any son of Adam. His very journey to England had been prompted by humanity and self-abnegation. All this had touched her imagination.

Whilst Mr. Meridian was speaking, she secretly acknowledged that his arrows struck home. What were her words worth when she reiterated intentions and promises of returning? Yet she felt compelled to say something on her own behalf.

"If I thought that a winter in the South would make me despise my old friends, I should stay at home," she said, almost bluntly.

"Would you really do that?" he asked, with a burst of passionate earnestness. Then, recalled to a sense of realities, feeling that the talked-of departure was at last no mere jest, but a hard, cruel reality, and that perhaps for the last time they sat face to face in friendly confabulation, he could resist temptation no longer. The impulse to speak out mastered him.

"Ah!" he cried—and for a moment he was a prey to feminine weakness, and trembled from head to foot,

whilst his voice was thick with tears—"it is my life that you take with you when you go away, and you will never understand."

"But I do understand," Eugenia replied, in tones almost as passionate as his own. "And because I understand, I came to say something on my own account to you now. If my friendship is worth anything, if it can make you happy, take that; and, for once and for all, bid me not go to Algeria."

He understood exactly the meaning of this little speech—a more magnanimous utterance surely never passed any woman's lips. She expressed her willingness to become his wife, simply because he loved her and was unhappy. The bright hopes that beckoned, the unfulfilled romance of girlhood, the dreams and aspirations not in his own power to realise—she would renounce all these if he willed it. The motives that prompted her self-devotion he understood also.

Recalling their intercourse during the last few months, he saw how easily a sensitive nature might find matter for contrition. There was that unfortunate *imbroglio* with Mr. Bacchus, to begin with; and not only on one, on a dozen occasions, she had accepted his services—services that might well seem to claim a reward. For himself, he had never reproached her, except for not loving him.

Touched, humiliated, transported by the magnitude of the sacrifice, he stood irresolute. Now he said to himself that he could make this girl happy, that in refusing to accept her self-renunciation he was yielding to morbid scruples. Vanished a few bright years, dispelled a few radiant dreams, and this brilliant Eugenia would need sure anchorage as any common woman! What

was the worth and stability of these toys, these gewgaws, she now clutched at so feverishly? Travel, adventure, romance, forsooth!—would she be any the better or happier for them in the end? Might not the existence and love he offered give surer guarantees of happiness than any glimpses of a more varied life, any stranger's fancy? For himself he could speak with assurance; for others he dare not answer.

These thoughts flashed through his mind swift as lightning. For one wild moment the crowning joy of life seemed his own. He saw his home made perpetually sweet and beautiful by her presence. He stood on a pinnacle of earthly bliss, the envier of none, envied by not a few.

But the bewildering vision would not stay. Clear, unanswerable justice made itself heard, and swayed the storm of passion.

He drew back horrified at the bare thought of yielding to such a temptation. Even with the most rigid exercise of self-control and toleration on both sides, would such a compact be enduring? A wife's devotion without a wife's tenderness! oh, no! better, a thousand times, loneliness and isolation than the inevitable retribution of loveless wedlock. She was proud as well as himself. Her unhappiness would ever be studiously veiled from his ken—that he knew right well. But unhappiness must be the final portion of both.

Of no colourless nature this bright, beautiful Eugenia: she was born to expand, as a rose in sunshine. To accept the gift of her life on such unequal terms, now that the scales had fallen from his eyes, seemed little short of sacrilege.

All these thoughts were come and gone in a few

moments. Swiftly as if the decision had been instantaneous he answered her:

"If my love is worth anything, is it not capable of some sacrifice also?" he said, wholly broken down, for once using the language of real tenderness. "Go to Algeria," he added. "Go anywhere you please. Forget Hopedale altogether. Only be happy!"

Her eyes were full of tears, and he, too, could not get out another word. They shook hands in tearful silence; she passed out of the carol window into the garden, and thence, without being observed, by a field-path to the Manor.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### PRUE WRITES HER FIRST SERMON.

**S**O Sabina and Prue had come into their great fortune at last! They were able to sit down and inform old friends and neighbours at home that they had really heard of something to their advantage. They wept, they giggled; they knelt down and solemnly thanked Heaven; they lay awake till dawn making plans for the future; finally both succumbed to the overjoy. They took to their beds, from which it required all the Curate's medical skill and philosophy to raise them. He exhorted, reprov'd, and sermonised; prescribed by turns pills, powders, tonics, and sedatives; and, after a day or two, his specifics worked the cure. The pair rose one morning feeling, said Sabina, as if nothing had happened, after all.

“And, after all, nothing has happened worth mentioning,” continued the little woman, endeavouring, as usual, to shake off earthly dross. “You and I get several thousand pounds apiece, which merely means so much more money henceforth paid to butchers, grocers, drapers, and undertakers; for of course we must die some day, and our end will be considerably hastened by living on the fat of the land. There cannot be two opinions as to that. Now, had you written a second Waverley novel, and jumped into world-wide celebrity; had I discovered that I could sing like Jenny

Lind or dance like Fanny Elssler—we should have had something serious to crow about.”

“We must crow about what we have got,” Prue replied cheerfully; “and how many more deserving than ourselves would be thankful to have as good cause! I still feel, I am sure, as if I were standing on my head.”

“I assure you, now that the first surprise is over, the matter seems hardly worth a second thought,” Sabina said, with an air of superiority. “Of course, had my Edwin been by to share this good fortune, things would wear a wholly different aspect. I am to-day, at heart, as I was five-and-twenty years ago, a sorrowing widow.”

“A sorrowing widow is better able to support her troubles when she has a little money in her pocket!” Prue said. “After the struggles we have had to make ends meet and keep up a respectable appearance on eighty pounds a year between us, we ought to rejoice in being able to set up our carriage—well, not that exactly; but a pony-chaise will certainly be within our means, and between walking and riding is all the difference in the world. Then there are the poor to think of. How pleasant to feel able to bestow money as well as tracts and good advice! The poor people at home always seemed as grateful as possible, I must say that for them; but, when you can give half a pound of meat to a hungry man, it is more to the purpose.”

Sabina tossed her head.

“You will, of course, do as you choose with your own. For my part, I never mean to lay out a single farthing on charity, so called. My endeavour will be to improve the taste of the working-classes by offering prizes for poetical compositions, and paying the learned



to lecture on the philosophy of the Stoics. My Edwin was always talking about them—Zeno especially.”

“Would that sort of thing be generally understood?” asked Prue doubtfully.

“It doesn’t do to give people what they understand, as Edwin used to say. I remember his words so well. ‘Bina,’ he said—‘Bina, if you want to elevate your fellows, discourse to them on something quite beyond their comprehension. That is the secret of all great intellectual revolutions.’”

Prue still looked discommending. These theories savoured to her of irreligiousness. Sabina, to her thinking, always stood on the brink of Stoicism, or something equally dreadful. Poor Prue often wished Edwin’s wise saws at the bottom of the sea. They worried her extremely.

Thus, in spite of Sabina’s deprecations, chatted the happiest pair of mortals under the sun. Sabina had a well-thumbed copy of Johnson’s “Vanity of Human Wishes” in her pocket, and produced it from time to time, in order to keep down ebullitions. “Let us be as happy as the day is long,” Edwin used to say; “but, for Heaven’s sake! no ebullitions.”

In the midst of their lively talk, the door was opened an inch and Prue caught sight of the Curate. He beckoned her out. She was with him in a moment. He invited her into his study, and, standing with his back to the window, said in a husky voice:

“I am feeling very unwell—have got a splitting headache; and this sermon, by hook or by crook, must be finished to-night. Do you think you could possibly do it for me?”

“I will try,” Prue said, inwardly trembling. She

had no literary experience whatever, but would never have dreamed of refusing the Curate anything. Had he asked her not only to write the sermon, but to stand up in the pulpit next morning and preach it, she would have said "Yes," to oblige him.

"It is not at all a difficult subject," continued Mr. Bacchus—"about Ruth and Orpah; and the text is, 'Whither thou goest, I will go, . . . where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.' You have but to resume the thread of my discourse. All is as straight sailing as possible."

"I can but do my best," replied Prue, smiling.

"Best or worst, it will be a sermon all the same, and I daresay much better than my own generally are. So scribble away!" said the Curate.

He closed the door, and Prue heard him go to his bedroom and lock himself in.

What could there have happened? wondered Prue. He spoke of headache, but his disordered looks betokened mental rather than bodily distress. Was it some pecuniary difficulty he had got into? some claim put in that he had no means of discharging? She thanked Heaven that it was now in her power to relieve him of such anxieties. Nothing could repay his kindness to Sabina and herself, and Mr. Bacchus was the first who ought to benefit by their improved fortunes.

Then she dipped pen in ink and valiantly scribbled away. If there existed an avocation in which Prudence Perfect was born to shine, it was certainly that of writing sermons. She had the Scriptures at her fingers' end, and, altogether without any apprenticeship to the sublime art of scribbledom, could write sweet, unalloyed, rustic English.

But it was not of literary skill she thought now. Sabina had spoken of Jenny Lind and Fanny Elssler. Prue's raptures might rather be compared to those of Sappho in her most impassioned mood, or of Jeanne d'Arc when first hearing the heavenly voices. The task before her seemed in itself sacred; the fact of Mr. Bacchus having set it lent additional sweetness and solemnity. She felt that, no matter her want of learning, incapacity, inexperience, she must make her words live. The subject, too, exactly suited her frame of mind. Was she not like Ruth in Bible story? Did she not feel that whither the Curate went she must go, and where he died there must she be buried? Tears of mingled ecstasy and sorrow rose to her eyes, but she dashed them away for the sake of her work. Mr. Bacchus was in the habit of making his sermons long. "Poor people," he used to say, "liked to get as much as possible for their money. They would listen to him all day, if he chose to hold forth."

So Prue's pen moved as if she were under the spell of inspiration. She knew exactly what form the composition of a sermon should take—a piece of knowledge not astonishing in one who had listened regularly to two on Sundays, and as many on week-days as she could get at, for wellnigh thirty years. The orthodox division into heads was now strictly adhered to, the stereotyped parallels bought into relief, the historic coincidences dwelt upon. Then came the general summary and the moral, and here Prue was little likely to be at a loss either. She was a first-rate moraliser. If any one could extract a moral from a dumpling, it was Prue; and if the homeliest subjects could thus be turned to account, what might one not expect when she took in

hand a theme so lovely and suggestive as that of Ruth and Naomi?

Fluent as she had been on the subject of Moab and the genealogy of Obed's son, she excelled herself in retelling the story of a woman tender and devoted as herself. Her whole being thrilled with emotion whilst penning the last page. Not only the delight of being serviceable to her friend and the conviction of a hitherto undiscovered gift imparted a glow of satisfaction: she felt supreme pleasure in thus being set on a level with Christ's ministers, for once perhaps being made instrumental in leading the thoughtless to heaven.

She had just accomplished her task and was glancing at her manuscript with silent rapture, when the Curate burst in.

"You don't mean to say you have done already?" he asked, with a look of relief. "I only wish I could be half as expeditious. But you are new to the business. You would find it as tiresome as I do after a while."

"I hope it will do. Have you time to look through it?" asked Prue nervously.

"Oh," said Mr. Bacchus, "I have time enough for anything. It is the head I want. I assure you I could not read your sermon just now if you paid me twenty pounds."

This somewhat ungracious remark would have damped Prue's ardour, but for the Curate's look of extreme wretchedness. There was a wild expression in his eyes which frightened her.

She put aside her manuscript sadly. The sweet meed of praise she had expected from his lips was not to be her reward as yet.

"Oh!" she said, "something very serious, I am sure, is the matter. Will you not tell me what it is?"

The poor Curate threw himself on the sofa and burst into tears.

"You know already," he got out. "She is going away next week—Miss Ivory, I mean."

"Do not be so cast down. Sooner or later she will come back again," Prue said, ready to weep out of compassion.

That sweet, artless voice of comfort but made the Curate's tears fall faster. There he lay sobbing, the very personification of helplessness, misery, and despair.

"She will never come back," he murmured. "I foresee exactly what will happen: she will marry that Frenchman! Why was not I born a Frenchman!"

Prue had risen to go. She felt a delicacy in staying. He would naturally like to have his grief to himself. Divining her intention, the Curate stopped her.

"Don't forsake me, dear!" he said, holding out one hand and motioning her to sit down beside him.

Prue, blushing and smiling through her tears, did as she was bidden. Still grasping her hand, he went on:

"I assure you, if it were not for the poor children and kind friends like yourself, and for the look of the thing, being in holy orders, I should make away with myself. It was as much as I could do to keep from jumping into the horse-pond just now."

"Oh!" Prue cried; "you would not thus destroy your valuable life! And think of the misery you would cause others!"

"I don't want to make others miserable. I know what it is too well myself," Mr. Bacchus went on. "My life henceforth will be as uninteresting as if spent within the four walls of a prison. A man must be very far gone to feel like that."

"Great griefs pass, under God's blessing," Prue said, mildly persuasive. "You may be ready to jump into the horse-pond to-day, but this day twelvemonth you will very likely feel as cheerful as possible."

"Then, if that day ever comes," the Curate replied, more fully realising the sweetness of Prue's sympathy every moment—"if that day ever comes, will you marry me?"

"Oh, thank you!" Prue said, wholly overcome. "Thank you, very, very much!"

"What you have to thank me for, I can't conceive," bluntly retorted the Curate. "If you were not forbearance itself, you would be ready to trample me under foot like a noisome reptile. I ought not to have mentioned this, of course, till the time comes that I do feel cheerful. But if I ever do again, will you—will you really marry me?"

"Of course," whispered Prue.

"Of course! I see no of course in the case!" again broke in the self-reproachful Mr. Bacchus. "You are a rich woman now, and I haven't a sixpence. How I have the impudence to ask, I can't imagine. I am always doing things I can't imagine I should do, were I driven to it."

"But, fortunately, other people see us in a different and more favourable light than we do ourselves," Prue said, all appreciation and tenderness.

"I am thankful you see me in a favourable light. It is the one ray of sunshine in gloom black as night. I hope I shall feel better when the dreadful day is over, that is all. I am sure it will be as bad to me to see Miss Ivory steam off by train with that Frenchman as to take part in her funeral."

"It will not be so bad for her. When we love our friends very much, we must rejoice in their happiness, whether we can share it with them or no."

"I wish I could feel so," retorted Mr. Bacchus. "But I am not a good Christian—never was. I cannot bear to have my fondest hopes dashed to the ground; yet, if they had been realised, if Miss Ivory had married me, such happiness would have been my soul's destruction. I see that written on the wall."

To a woman less oblivious of self than Prue, these outpourings would have been anything but flattering. As sweetest flattery, however, she accepted every word. Was he not confiding in her because she was to be his wife? The wild fancy for Miss Ivory, she said, would pass away. Her memory would gradually become to him as a beautiful dream. Prue was conscious of no jealousy, no uneasiness; only a little secret satisfaction at the thought of Miss Ivory's coming departure. It was better both for the Curate's peace of mind and her own that Eugenia should go to Algeria.

"I certainly feel a trifle better," he said, after a time. "Suppose you read me your sermon? If I should fall asleep, you would forgive me—would you not? You know, all preaching always has a drowsy effect, more or less."

Prue briskly took up the manuscript, and, greatly to her delight, the Curate did not go to sleep.

"On my word!" he said. "It is A 1! You won't catch me writing many sermons when we are married, I can tell you! I only wish you could preach 'em, too. However, we need neither write nor preach sermons unless we please. The world will be before us, as to Adam and Eve, where to choose. But I wish you had

not come into that money. I mean I wish I had asked you to marry me before you did come into it. Do what I will, I cannot prevent my conduct from appearing in the most odious light. The fact is——”

But Prue would not permit him to say what the fact was. “It is so much pleasanter to look forwards than backwards,” she said; “and not all the talking in the world will prevent women like Miss Ivory from turning men’s heads. Helen of Troy could not help herself; but, for all that, she caused a deal of mischief, poor woman!”



## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### MORE DISENTANGLEMENTS.

**M**EANWHILE, the prodigal son, the Benjamin of claimants, was in high favour with every one. Nobody, except Mrs. De Robert, had a word to say against the others: the ladies were found amiable and sympathetic, the elder Derrober all old-fashioned chivalrousness and enthusiasm, the younger ever entertaining to listen to; the priest, besides being urbane and eloquent, was a mystification to be admired at a distance. With the last newcomer, it was a case of general falling in love at first sight; and this fact may be taken as strikingly illustrative of human character and human history. In the other men had been embodied spiritual and intellectual activity—philosophy, faith, speculation. The stranger personified action; and it is the men of action who have fascinated the majority of their fellows from the beginning of chronicled time until now. Mrs. De Robert may be taken as an average type of humanity, neither better nor worse, neither wiser nor simpler, than the ordinary run.

She could not help listening to the animated talk of the first three: she really liked them in her own heart; but neither the discourse of priest, philosopher, nor satirist, took any hold on her imagination. She did not feel as if these kinsmen belonged to her. Very different was the case of the army-surgeon. His brief, stir-

ring narrative of exploit and adventure she delighted in, and could understand. To have that dear Affie in the house, as she expressed it, was the next best thing to consorting with a real live Robinson Crusoe. The pathos of his position would have been irresistible even in a commonplace man. This handsome, sunburnt, weather-worn hero had gone through as many hair-breadth 'scapes as Othello. Gently born and bred, circumstances had compelled him to face the most cruel trials that confront humanity. The sight of vast populations decimated by hunger and unhoused by earthquakes; defenceless villages stormed by infuriated Arabs, bent on pillage and slaughter; fever and pestilence rampant in the land—he had passed through all these ordeals, yet his sunny temper and faith in humanity remained intact. Whilst recounting past experiences, he could, all the same, throw heart and soul into this new English life, familiar to him hitherto in novels only.

Mrs. De Robert might do her best to monopolise the favourite of the hour. He was here, there, and everywhere—at neighbouring tea-tables and lawn-tennis courts—ready to sing, waltz, play duets, help to get up a picnic. Nothing in the way of recreation, new experience, or sociability came amiss to him; and to crown all, in spite of being a Frenchman—which, in popular phrase, means a scoffing Voltaire—when Sunday came round, there he was at the parish church, with Mrs. De Robert leaning on his arm!

As for Miss Ivory, she saw less than any one of the fascinating stranger; yet they were already on cordial terms.

“My time to enjoy your society will come in Algeria,”

he said, laughingly triumphant. "I must not rob your friends of a single quarter of an hour now. You ride, of course? I will procure for your use a gentle-tempered Arab horse. We will breathe the very air of the desert together."

This indulgence in prospective freedom, foretaste of new experience and adventure, was hardly the most attractive feature of her new life. Algeria would not be Hopedale. In Algeria, Hopedale problems would cease to perplex her. No more painful decisions would be impending, no more inner conflicts at hand! And the realization of her wishes so far—Bongo, or what was next to Bongo, at last!—palm-groves, Bedouin tents, and the dusky population of the desert!

"For my part, when we get there, I should like to stay and become a second Lady Hester Stanhope," Mrs. De Robert said, in high glee at the thought of setting out. "And as to you, Ivey, I know what you'll do in the end: you'll marry that dear Affie; and those jewels, if we ever recover them, shall be yours—with more besides."

Miss Ivory laughed away the insinuation, but Mrs. De Robert continued with the utmost gravity:

"Oh, yes, laugh as much as you please! We may laugh or cry. Things work one way or another, and sometimes for the best. I feel as certain as my name is Sarah Roberts that you will marry a De Robert, after all; and, if you do, I give you my word for it, I'll leave you the best part of my money."

"I would marry a chimney-sweep on those conditions, of course!" Miss Ivory replied, with much seriousness.

"Humph!" cried Mrs. De Robert, affronted. "I hope you don't compare Affie to a chimney-sweep!"

"One might as well marry a chimney-sweep as a saint, provided he is an acquaintance of only four-and-twenty hours' standing, or thereabouts. But have it all your own way. Marry me to the Dey of Tunis, if you please! We are at last to set forth, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in search of adventure. I can think of nothing else."

"I do wish we could take the poor dear cats," sighed Mrs. De Robert. "I cannot bear the thought that they will perhaps be low-spirited without us."

"Foreign cookery might not agree with them, nor with the dogs either. I think they will be happier at home," Eugenia replied.

"There is ever some drawback to happiness in this life," Mrs. De Robert said. "However, Affie has promised, if I am homesick, to bring me back at a moment's notice. I am tired to death of Hopedale, and all the people in it; but, I daresay, as soon as ever I have started, I shall cry my eyes out to return. To go all the way to Algery seems a madcap scheme, at my time of life."

"My dear Roberta!" Miss Ivory exclaimed, opening her eyes wide; "don't you know that what seems an adventure to us is no more to the rest of the world than a trip from London to Hampstead Heath? Sir Thomas Bates, you remember, visited Algiers and Morocco when he was verging on ninety; and the Miss Spencers, when both past eighty, went up the Nile, and climbed to the top of the Pyramids! The older people are nowadays, the farther they travel."

"The more fools they, then!" was the rejoinder. "What do old folks like myself want but our cats, warming-pan, and buttered toast? However, I'll go,

as I've said I'll go, Ivey, although I feel a presentiment that this journey will be the death of me."

Miss Ivory knew her old friend's whimsicalities too well to take these observations seriously. The Algerian project would wear a dozen different aspects in Mrs. De Robert's eyes ere the moment of departure came. But the departure would take place.

The news of this romantic expedition had, of course, spread like wildfire through the place, and formed the chief topic of conversation. In more cosmopolitan circles, such a scheme excites little curiosity or astonishment. "To winter with the swallows in Algeria" nowadays is not more difficult of achievement than a trip to Brighton. Hopedale folks travelled seldom. Wedding tours were generally made to London or, at farthest, to Paris. Valetudinarians journeyed to Moffat or Torquay. It only rarely happened that anyone got as far as the Rhine or Chamounix.

For the most part, people kept their money in their pockets, and travelled by means of the book-club or circulating library. To set off for the confines of the desert, and under French guidance, savoured of the marvellous. Some predicted one thing, some another; all came to the conclusion that Miss Ivory would marry the newcomer. It could not be otherwise.

"Talk the four sails off yonder windmill, talk Morecambe Bay into a cedar forest, talk a garrison of fools into wise men, you will never make me believe that I have a chance with Miss Ivory," said the Doctor to his uncle. "However, in order that you may not reproach me till my dying day, I will go this very afternoon and ask her."

"There speaks my valiant Frank!" said the elder

man, delightedly clapping his hands. "Go in for the prize and win!"

"A fool's cap or a woman's scorn! The wisest have deserved as much before now," was the reply. "Well, Mr. Curmudgeon, what am I to say?"

"Say, indeed! say to such a girl as that? The veriest dolt that ever breathed would feel inspired at the very sight of her. Say what other lovers have been moved to say, under the same circumstances, from Adam downwards."

"And more barefaced lies men have never uttered!" cried the Doctor. "Would you have me swear that I am ready to lay down my life for her? Paltry concern as it is, she knows I would do no such thing. Shall I vow that she shall mould me to her will, that I will prove ductile as wax in her fingers? When did a man so much as change the colour or shape of his waistcoat to please his wife? Ought I to swear that I love her? A sorry jest that! The wretches who have cheated their wives, proved faithless to their wives, robbed them, beaten them, murdered them—did they not all swear, once upon a time, that they were over head and ears in love? No, sirrah! teach me something more to the purpose to say to Miss Ivory, or, by my faith, I'll stay at home!"

"You are right so far, Frank. I don't think a girl of sense and spirit wants to be harangued upon such an occasion. Make thy offer pithy; woo her with thy wit, man; let thy understanding take her heart by storm!"

"I'll tell you what it is," Dr. Derrober said, getting up. "I'll just say, 'Eugenia Ivory, will you marry Frank Derrober?' When a man has said that, has he not said everything? What matters it whether he is

ready to marry her for her beauty, her sprightliness, or her fortune? Not a jot, that I can see! The gist of the matter lies in the fact that he is ready to marry her at all; he can but wed one woman, and from the millions that breathe on this terrestrial globe—the dark-skinned, the blonde, the clever, the gay, the queen of society, down to the milkmaid—he has chosen her; that is to say, he fain would choose her. Poor as such a compliment may be in most cases, to say nothing of my own, 'tis the best a man has in his power to make. Off I am!"

"Heaven's blessing go with thee, my lad!" ejaculated the elder fervently.

"Don't bother Heaven about my affairs any more just yet," quoth the irreverent Doctor. "Have we not got our money?—a thousand times more than our deserts? Should we not leave Heaven to do our neighbours a good turn? Bye-bye, old gentleman! Take care of yourself in my absence!"

Thus saying, the Doctor started jauntily on his errand. He was not the kind of man to be cast down under any circumstances. This something to his advantage, this solid piece of good fortune in the shape of several thousand pounds, if it could not exalt, was at least not calculated to depress. A certain stoical resignation, a secret conviction of the hopelessness of his case, made him take refuge in outward gaiety. Moreover, he could not endure the thought of causing his uncle pain.

As good luck would have it, he found Miss Ivory alone. Mrs. De Robert, with her pseudo-nephew and the little Arab boy, had driven to the nearest town in order to make purchases. Eugenia stayed at home—

must it be confessed?—having urgent business with the milliner. He plunged straight to the heart of his subject.

“Is it ever worth while,” he began, “to ask a question when we know beforehand exactly how it will be answered?”

“That depends,” replied Miss Ivory gaily, although her colour went and came. “I suppose in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred we know exactly how our neighbours are; yet with what persistence we always say, ‘How d’ye do?’ as if they had just been dug up after an earthquake or risen from a sick-bed!”

“Can we ever be quite positive how a question will be answered?” continued the Doctor. “It seems that, alike in the weightiest as well as in the most trivial cases, there must ever be a margin of uncertainty. For instance, I once asked a veritable skinflint, a money-grubber, to lend me a hundred pounds. I felt it was just as likely that Mont Blanc would turn on a sudden to barley-sugar. The incomparable niggard actually said, ‘Yes.’ There is also this point to consider: are there not manifold questions that never ought to be propounded at all, by their intrinsic delicacy shut off from speculation, regulated to perpetual doubt, silence, and obscurity?”

“Certainly,” Miss Ivory replied, still animated, but uneasy. “What so impertinent as to connect a slate and pencil with the doings of the soul hereafter? mahogany tables and immortality?”

“I fear that I now put myself into the category of mahogany tables and the slate pencil,” resumed the wooer, outwardly playful, although in an earnest mood. “Miss Ivory, one jest before we part. Pray, madam,



why do you put on this missyish air of innocence when you know as well as I do that Frank Derrober has a heart? 'What if he has?' say you. 'Small concern of mine. I've hearts enough and to spare, handy, if I want any.' Aye, madam; but, an' it please ye, 'tis very much my concern. Well, I grant you, a heart is a poor thing in itself; but for all that 'tis a man's microcosm, his stock-in-trade as an immortal, the pack containing his all-in-all as he wanders a pedlar through the world. Am I and my wares just nothing to you?—so much Brummagem?"

"What can I say?" said Eugenia, taken by surprise, although she had tried to prepare herself for such a disclosure. She liked this genial, witty, *insouciant* Doctor; she could not bear the notion of paining and disappointing him; but there her feelings for him began and ended.

"What can you say?" he asked, determined to keep up his spirits to the end, to do battle for himself bravely, but, if worsted, to bear defeat with a cheerful air. "Frank Derrober," he had said to himself, "no ordinary tussle this. Fight with tooth and nail, lad! fight whilst any breath is left in thy body; for remember, if sent sprawling on the grass now, vanquished ignominiously, 'twill be thy first, last appearance in these lists. No more fray on account of ladies' smiles; thy last hope of shining in such a tourney vanished for ever!"

"What can you say?" he repeated. "I am the very person to come to in your quandary—the prompter with book open at the right place. Say, then, 'Does a more impudent fellow exist on the face of the earth? But, softly, there is a grain of honesty in his composition. Many of his sex, I'll answer for it, can hardly boast of

that; and candour is the best of soaps: it washes the conscience clean. As he has told me the worst himself, there will surely be no pitfalls for me to stumble into. Again, a potent argument in his favour, he has strolled half-way through the garden of life without so much as coveting a single rose till now. If not sweetest flattery this, at least evidence of nice judgment and fine taste on his part!"

"You think much too highly of my poor self," Miss Ivory said, anxious to stop him, not quite knowing how to do it.

"Madam, you are but as God made you. Small credit to Eugenia Ivory for being what she is. She could not alter the colour of her eyes or cut down her stature by an inch, if she tried till Doomsday. But perhaps I have not your ladyship's permission to prompt you further?"

Miss Ivory, making an effort to be quite self-composed, did now put in a deprecatory word.

"I am very sorry——" she began.

He sprang to his feet in a moment, hat in hand.

"Now I bow to my sovereign lady, and accept dismissal. Pretty words these, but none have ever caused more cruel pangs! The editorial 'I am very sorry'—how many garreteers has it driven to suicide? The official 'I am very sorry'—is it not the epitaph of buried ambitions too numerous to count? Your 'very sorry' I will believe, though, truth to tell, I seldom believe anything. Who but children and idiots do? I wish you well, then, madam, although you have dealt me a nasty blow. Plasters and poultices won't heal it. 'Twill hurt me all my life; 'twill accompany me to my grave. But I hope you will be happy. You are as

innocent of these villainies as a baby that puts his little foot into the cream-noggin. Farewell!"

"We shall meet again? You are not going to leave Hopedale before us?" she said, feeling bound to say something.

His raillery disconcerted her more than any mere display of feeling could have done. The underlying bitterness was but too apparent.

"Only stay here till the crack of doom, or as near it as possible, and we stay too," he replied. "But we understand that a precursory, a lesser crack of doom, is to take place one day next week—in other words, Miss Ivory quits Hopedale."

"Yes; Mrs. De Robert is going to start with me for Algeria," she said, blushing, she hardly knew why; leaving out all allusion to her companion, she hardly knew why either.

He added in the same tones:

"Under the circumstances you would be no farther off at Timbuktu or in the moon, and no nearer if we were to remain perpetually next-door neighbours. Only be happy wherever you are!"

"I hope you will be happy too!" she stammered forth.

"I promise not to jump into the Falls of Niagara or blow my brains out with a revolver. Will that satisfy you?"

Then he took his leave, and, on reaching home, so well dissembled his chagrin that the elder Derrober secretly consoled himself.

"Thank God!" he reflected: "this wound is not incurable after all. My poor dear Frank will pull himself together and marry, in time, some pretty country-

woman. And, thanks to decidedly the most disagreeable old woman it was ever my luck to come in contact with—whom may Heaven crown with felicity!—we have at least something to pop into the pot without thinking beforehand, and a roof to shelter us both as long as we live. It is astonishing how a golden windfall will turn white hairs brown again, and soothe all cares, even disappointed love!”

## CHAPTER XL.

### AT THE RAILWAY STATION.

SO the precursory crack of doom had come at last! Early one bright September morning the little railway station at which Sabina and Prue had alighted a few weeks back showed unusual signs of animation. One by one thither flocked Miss Ivory's friends and lovers to bid her Godspeed and farewell. The ladies had flowers in their hands. A magnificent bouquet of exotics, ready for presentation to Mrs. De Robert, might be seen in the waiting-room. As the hour of departure drew near, all faces were turned anxiously towards the Hopedale road. Even the station-master and porters shared the general curiosity.

"Oh dear!" said Mr. Bacchus—he had changed his mind at the last moment, and joined the rest—"I do trust nothing is the matter—that they won't be too late, I mean. It would be quite shocking to make us go through the same trial again, just for all the world like a rope that snaps at the hanging!"

This not over-chivalrous speech was addressed to his future wife, but Prue affected to take it as a matter of course.

"I daresay Miss Ivory feels as I do, and will not come till the last moment. Saying good-bye is as bad as having a tooth out—to affectionate people, I mean. It can't be got over too quickly."

"After all," put in Sabina, whose mind at such moments as these was ever full of the lost Edwin, "as Edwin used to say—I remember his dear, wise words so well—'Never bluster or fluster, Bina,' he said. 'We are never really too late for anything—so long as we are alive, of course. If we miss one train, we can take the next. What we can't do to-day we can most likely do to-morrow, or ten years hence. Too late,' he used to say, 'is a fiction, except in the mouth of a fish-salesman.'"

"Or plethoric spider letting his brisk neighbour gulp down unwary flies," put in the Doctor, who had just come up with his uncle. "Ladies, I hope that you feel all the better for having this little business settled at last. We are now—Heaven be praised!—worth being robbed and murdered; as I take it, the true criterion of gentility, the just ambition of every well-regulated mind."

Prue glanced at her lover and smiled.

"I don't think such terrors disturb us much," she replied.

"And thieves and murderers don't tell us when to expect them, like duns and bailiffs," put in Mr. Bacchus, with a grimace. "We are not in a perpetual misery of expectation."

"My feeling is that we ought to present our esteemed friend the Vicar with a testimonial," said the elder Derrober. "But for him—I feel sure of it—we should never have got a halfpenny. Here we were, and here we must have stayed, subsisting on public charity, a charge to the parish."

"I am ready to meet the most exalted views on the subject," put in the Doctor, with a hand in each pocket

rattling what coin he chanced to find there. "Unless I soon rid myself of my superfluous wealth, I feel that blood-letting or some other desperate remedy will be necessary. But here comes the old harridan—I mean our esteemed benefactress—with Miss Ivory, the juvenile Mahomet, and the Frenchman; and post-haste behind, cheek by jowl, the two parsons."

The elder Derrober glanced anxiously at his nephew. How could he bear this trying ordeal? The Doctor, however, had schooled himself into self-possession. He looked careworn, like a man whose nights have been troubled; but throughout the scene remained every inch himself—animated, swift of speech, as if this were one of the happiest moments of his life.

Prue, too, glanced uneasily at the Curate. He was all excitement. His eyes shone, his pale cheeks were flushed; he looked like a man under the influence of some unwholesome stimulant.

"Thank God, it will soon be over!" he said to himself, as Miss Ivory drove up, beautiful and radiant.

Not that Eugenia could leave her friends and lovers without a pang. This series of farewells was painful to her as well as to them; but the tension of the last few weeks had ended. She was free! At the approach of the pony-carriage there ensued a little commotion. The porters ran up to load themselves with wraps and umbrellas. The Doctor, all alertness, helped out the ladies before their French visitor could dismount. The elder Derrober gave Mrs. De Robert his arm. Mr. Bacchus volunteered to take the tickets, and of course took them for Liverpool instead of London. Sabina and Prue bustled into the waiting-room after the bouquet. The Vicar and the priest, who arrived a minute

after, chatted in French with the army-surgeon. The Doctor kept close to Miss Ivory.

"I so hoped that the train had gone without us!" ejaculated Mrs. De Robert. "I feel every bit as if you were all bundling me into a hearse."

"At any rate, you don't look like it, my dear madam," Mr. Derrober said, smiling. "Permit me to say that you appear the picture of health; and long may you live to enjoy the satisfaction of making six people happy!"

"'Tis little enough you have to thank me for!" jerked out Mrs. De Robert. "But, bless us and save us! what on earth is this?"

Seeing that time pressed, and that everybody else was occupied, Sabina and Prue now produced the presentation bouquet. It was a veritable triumph of the florist's skill—a real work of art, possessing but one drawback: it could not be preserved, and it could not be eaten. That sheaf of blush-roses, Neapolitan violets, and maidenhair fern, was ephemeral as ice-palaces constructed in Northern capitals—a marvel to-day, nothingness to-morrow. Appended to the bouquet was a more solid offering, in the shape of a small silver drinking-cup, on which were engraved the initials of Mrs. De Robert and some of her grateful next of kin.

"We all wanted to show our appreciation of your kindness," began Prue, no longer timid as of old.

It was astonishing how the fact of Mr. Bacchus' declaration, coupled with that of her good fortune, had given her self-confidence. She did not dread her awful kinswoman now any more than the Curate's baby.

"You couldn't have laid out your money worse!" blurted forth Mrs. De Robert. "I was never fond of



flowers squeezed together like herrings in a barrel. And what will it look like when it gets to London, I should like to know?"

A week ago, such a rebuff would have completely disconcerted both Sabina and Prue. To-day, however, they were both too much exalted by their altered circumstances to care a straw what Mrs. De Robert chose to say to them.

Prue went on persuasively:

"We understood that you were going to stay a few days in London, and have brought a basket for the flowers. They will look bright on your dinner-table."

"Much time shall we have to look at them!" was the ungracious reply. "And what's that gimcrack dangling below?"

"That is a small goblet for travelling purposes," Prue continued, with as much composure as before.

Just then the priest came up.

"You will observe, my dear cousin," he said blandly, addressing himself to Mrs. De Robert, "that the names of the donors are but five. We Jesuits bestow upon the poor only."

"Quite right, too," replied Mrs. De Robert. "However," she added, turning to the others, "I thank you, all the same; and the bouquet shall go with us to London, since we have no carriage to pay for it. How late the train is, to be sure! I wish, for one, that it would not come at all. I never repented of anything half so much in all my life as of this wild-goose chase to Algery. Not one of us will ever see Hopedale again—that I feel certain of."

Meantime, chance had favoured the lovers so far. Alike the Vicar, the Curate, and the Doctor got a part-

ing word with Miss Ivory. Each had kept a sharp lookout for his opportunity, and made the very most of it when it came.

The first to be thus favoured was Mr. Bacchus. Impetuous as a schoolboy, he had proffered to take the tickets, blundered as to the destination, finally came back triumphant and apologetic.

"There you are!" he cried, as he handed Miss Ivory the tickets and the change. He glanced round, and, seeing that no one was by, added, in an eager undertone: "I feel as upset by your departure as if I had fallen from the top of a church steeple. But you won't be bothered with my importunities any more. I am going to marry again!" He glanced at the distant figure of Prue, and went on: "No choice lay open to me. I was ready to hang myself when I heard that you were really going off to Algiers. When I have a wife I shall be obliged to put a stop to such desperate thoughts."

"I hope you will both be very happy," Eugenia said. She felt sure that it must be Prue of whom he was speaking. He looked crestfallen and ashamed.

"I don't deserve her. I don't deserve the love of any woman," he whispered. "You have made a fool of me till the end of my days."

Just then a porter came up with a sovereign of Eugenia's money, that which the agitated Curate had left on the counter. That little incident created a diversion. Mr. Bacchus returned to the ticket office to assure himself, as he said, that he had not left his head there!

Meantime, very alertly the Doctor took his place by Miss Ivory's side.

"What a comfort to me to feel that I have been

perfectly useless to you," he began—"never rendered you the tiniest personal service whatever! Think of me as of some poor little struggling moon in the human universe, content to have been illuminated by its sun for one brief moment, then to sink back into perpetual darkness."

Was he in jest or earnest? Miss Ivory hardly knew. She was but a girl. There are many things that books cannot teach us. What may a naïve maiden know of a man's passion? Yet some glimmer of the truth seemed to reach her, something like conviction to flash across her mind. She looked at him with a tender entreaty for pardon in her true eyes, and replied tremblingly:

"Forgive me for not being other than I am!"

There was no time for him to say more. The priest now came up to take courteous leave, then he made way for Mr. Meridian.

The Vicar was calmness itself, but frigid; it was as if he feared to speak, lest this painfully-attained self-mastery should play him false at the last. When he spoke, his voice was strained and unlike his own:

"You will let me hear from you occasionally," he said, in that tone of authority he could hardly help using even towards her. "I shall want to know your plans."

"Of course I will write! We intend to return to Hopedale in the spring," she said.

But the cheering words had no meaning for his ears. His face had a blank look. He was on the verge of losing presence of mind.

Now, indeed, the white clouds of the coming train could be distinctly seen through the trees. Mr. Meridian's lips trembled, his eyes filled with tears.

"What would I not give to be going with you!" he said; and the words were as pathetic as those of a sick man when he sees robust companions setting out for a holiday excursion.

Eugenia's eyes grew moist also, and she pulled down her veil as he conducted her to the railway carriage.

Then followed a chorus of farewells, good wishes, and "God bless you!" Sabina and Prue were finally overcome with emotion. The priest wiped his eyes. Even Mrs. De Robert looked ready to cry as she sat holding Mr. Affie's hand.

"Don't forget to go and see the poor cats!" she shouted to Mr. Meridian as at last the train steamed out of the station; the army-surgeon waving his cap and reiterating:

*"Au revoir! au revoir!"*

Mr. Meridian turned drily towards the little group on the platform.

"Now that Mrs. De Robert is fairly off," he said, with an odd expression, "I may as well tell you that you are all richer than you imagine. The much-talked-of treasure—the pictures, the plate, and the rest of the De Robert heirlooms—certainly vanished; but the thief was myself. I saw as plainly as a man can see anything that drastic measures were necessary. I was driven to some such expedient by the necessities of the case. Suppose you all come to the Vicarage this afternoon and inspect your new property?"

There was a clamour of thanks, but the Vicar did not stop to say more. Inviting his companion to be seated, he stepped into the pony-carriage and drove off, only looking back to say:

"Won't you come, too, Bacchus?"

So the train having Miss Ivory for passenger steamed off in the direction of London, and on three hearts left behind there settled a gloom most of us can understand. Who has not lived through a similar experience? Over the beautiful world broods the very genius of peace. The blue heavens are not more dazzlingly fair than the green flowery earth. But that curl of white smoke disappearing through the trees means for us all the emptiness and bitter sense of loss that any human heart can feel. The wheels of life move on briskly as ever. The bustle of busy multitudes drowns our sighs. Gradually we, too, learn to smile again as we take our usual places at the board of life, though with scant appetite and in no humour for saying grace. All that made life's summer vanished with that speeding train.

Mr. Bacchus would forget and be happy. The Doctor was too much of a Rabelais, of an Odysseus, to break his heart.

But Mr. Meridian in his quiet Vicarage—how fared it with him?

“One thing is quite certain,” said Sabina, at the close of this eventful day: “Edwin made me see it clearly more than thirty years ago. Oh, the wise woman I should have been had those thirty years been spent by his side in blissful wedlock! ‘One thing is as certain as Holy Writ. Pray, my dear Bina, implant it on your mind,’ he said. ‘The precariousness of human affairs baffles the understanding of the sage. Newton himself could not have prognosticated what might or might not happen to a shoe-black as he walked down the street. But, no matter in what sphere of life we are thrown, we are bound to keep our eyes open.

The wise as well as the foolish may any moment, and in most unexpected fashion, hear of something to their advantage.' ”

Our little drama, then, is played out at last; and the curtain falls, but not on certain issues only. Just as one romance often begins where another leaves off, so the conclusion of a play may suggest many an unwritten scene. The question of Mrs. De Robert's next of kin was satisfactorily settled for once and for all, but others remained of equal interest to all concerned.

Would Miss Ivory return in the spring? Would she marry Mr. Meridian, and settle down to the life of a clergyman's wife, after all? or would she give her hand to the light-hearted but heroic stranger who had enticed her to far-off shores? Might not her old friends hear of her as moving in a wholly new sphere, taking the initiative, perhaps playing a noble and courageous part in some European colony under an African sun? She would find there an ample field for her energies, and wide scope for the disposal of her fortune. And the high-spirited, much-tried army-surgeon, who bore an English name, would he not rise to future eminence in the country of his adoption? Made independent by this inheritance, might he not become a foremost pioneer in colonisation—a providence to many?

Thus folks speculated concerning the pair.

For the present, Sabina stayed with her friend Prue, though it seemed likely that she, too, would ere long choose a home for herself. The elder Derrober's plans of a phalanstery pleased her. She had half promised

to join in the venture, and throw in her lot with those of the speculators.

"Yes," she would say, as she gazed on the charming landscape from the Curate's window, "'tis a sweet place; but, as Edwin used to observe, 'one place is just as good as another, if we look upon the matter in a proper light. The wise man will go into raptures over a cabbage-bed as readily as over a waterfall. The one is as much of a miracle as the other, if we go to the bottom of things.'"

"But we can't always go to the bottom of things," put in Prue. "The created world is, of course, wonderful in its most trifling detail; but it is natural to prefer gazing on a waterfall."

"It is not good for us to be always gazing on waterfalls," Sabina added. "As Edwin said—I remember his words so well—'Bina,' he said, 'Bina, accept the earthly and unearthly by turns. Cultivate spasms, be spasmodic, for only thus will you avoid a dead-level of feeling and perception. Put David before your mind, who danced in religious transport one moment, and the very next fell in love with his neighbour's wife. In order to keep clear of soul-killing indifference, we must let the mind get the upper hand to-day, and the body to-morrow.'"

Prue looked unconvinced. She could not bring herself to approve of all David's doings, any more than of all Edwin's conclusions.

"The worst of being spasmodic," she said, "is that we can't always stop spasms when they once begin. And of course, David was an exception, held up more for edification than example."

She was wondering how she should feel if her future

spouse should dance in religious ecstasy one moment, and look admiringly at another curate's wife the next. No such suspicions, however, disturbed her peace of mind. She trusted the Rev. Mr. Bacchus implicitly; and trust is the corner-stone of affection.

Mr. Meridian kept his own counsel. Questions put to him concerning the travellers he answered unsuggestively. The De Robert jewels he retained in his keeping. They were destined for Eugenia.

And when the swallows returned with the sunshine and May blossoms, certain feminine letters, bearing a foreign postmark, found their way more frequently to the Vicarage.

Mr. Meridian grew strangely affable, meek, and apologetic under the spell of some tremendous piece of good fortune. Folks hardly noticed subtler changes in their Vicar, but the simplest can put two and two together. When a man's house is beset by upholsterers and decorators, he most certainly makes ready for his bride.



## EPILOGUE.

WITH some of his own stories, a romancer falls in love at first sight; with others, he becomes gradually enamoured; for yet a third order, his feeling is steady, jog-trot friendship, which neither increases nor abates till author and *dramatis personæ* quietly take leave of each other at the colophon.

But from the moment that the story-teller dips pen in ink, and seeks to give his little world a local habitation and a name, to clothe his characters with flesh and blood, this is the real world to him, and the other mere nothingness and phantasmagoria. His next-door neighbours, all life, buxomness, and jollity, seem much less like substantial realities. He shuts himself up in his study, and consorts with the more tangible folks he finds there. And now comes to my mind a fable of the witty Greek writer, Lucian.

Diogenes, according to this fable, asks Hercules how, being a god, he has got to the under-world.

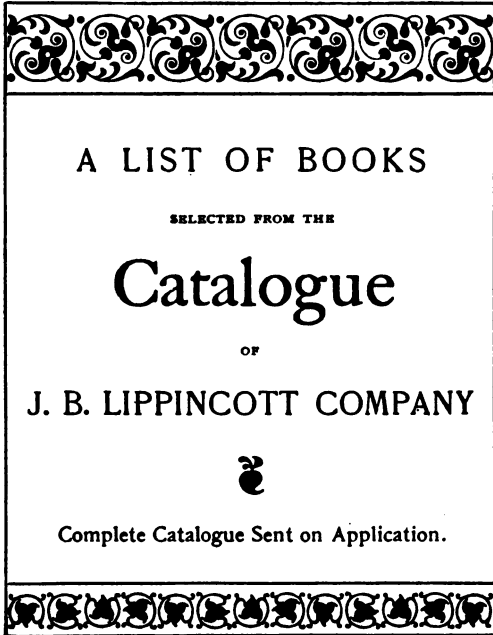
"Oh," says Hercules, "I am in heaven, sure enough! It is only my shadow, my phantom, strolling about here—not myself."

Diogenes, not satisfied with this explanation, wants to know how Hercules can be so sure of the matter. May it not be the shade in the upper region, and the real Hercules that inhabits the dominions of Pluto? A subtle disquisition follows as to which is which, leaving the two disputants where they were when they began.

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